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MYSTERIOUSLY MISSING

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MYSTERIOUSLY MISSING.

'Come and see my little Pickles in bed,' Mrs. Parker had said; 'they look so sweet and innocent in their sleep.'—*P.* 88.

MYSTERIOUSLY MISSING:

THE STRANGE ADVENTURES OF TWO LITTLE PICKLES.

BY THE

REV. FREDERICK LANGBRIDGE, B.A.

AUTHOR OF

'GASLIGHT AND STARS,' 'PEACOCK ALLEY,' ETC.

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TO

MY SISTER MARY,

IN GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF

HER CORDIAL INTEREST IN ALL MY LITERARY ATTEMPTS,

THIS LITTLE BOOK

IS AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED.

WELLESLEY LODGE, LIMERICK.

August 9, 1881.

CONTENTS.

		PAGE
I.	CHRISTMAS EVE	1
II.	BED	17
III.	CHRISTMAS DAY	26
IV.	THE COMPLETE LETTER-WRITER	32
V.	THE PICKLES ISSUE INVITATIONS	43
VI.	J. W. TOPPIN SENDS IN HIS LITTLE BILL	55
VII.	THE PICKLES RECEIVE COMPANY	66
VIII.	GOOD SOUND PORT: AN EXCELLENT FAMILY WINE	90
IX.	A LILAC COTTON AND A PAIR OF CORDUROYS	110
X.	AN OLD BROOM, WHICH DOESN'T SWEEP CLEAN	117
XI.	MASTER SAKER AT HOME	132
XII.	MYSTERIOUSLY MISSING	145
XIII.	TWO MONTHS AFTER, WITH A FEW LAST WORDS	153

MYSTERIOUSLY MISSING.

CHAPTER I.

CHRISTMAS EVE.

DATE—Christmas Eve, Eighteen-hundred-and-never-mind-what. Scene—Nelson Street, Copplestoke. Christmas Eve, and Christmas Eve with a vengeance, Christmas Eve, with three good inches of slush on the pavement, and a fog that looked like pease-soup and tasted like sulphur—a fog that, in spite of mufflers and respirators, would get up your nostrils, and down your throat, and into your eyes—a fog wherein miserable wayfarers, with lips pursed tight, yet compelled at intervals to cough, and so gulp down a mouthful of the atmospheric pease-soup, moved shiveringly and eerily, every now and then, in spite of caution, running into one another's arms, and disentangling themselves

with mutual muttered maledictions; wherein cabs crawled at a foot-pace, their drivers—hoarse with shrieking 'Hi, there!' and swallowing fog—venting their pent-up wrath in vicious slashes at any luckless errand-boy that came within reach of their whips; wherein the tower of St. Matthew's Church was swallowed bodily, and the taller houses ended vaguely and prematurely—'a fog,' to sum up succinctly in the words of Mr. Briggs, the pork-butcher, 'a fog that licked all.'

It was barely three o'clock in the afternoon, yet such few shops as there are in Nelson Street, which is situated in a professional quarter of the town, had been some while ago compelled to light up; but the blurred glimmer of their jets, feebly struggling against the swamping vapour, served only to deepen the prevalent gloom and despondency.

Not a soul, of course, was out of doors that could possibly help it. But who can help going out on Christmas Eve? One may have been never so provident in making one's arrangements, still something is sure to have been forgotten or to have gone wrong. The butcher has

not sent the sausages; Cook discovers, at the last moment, that the only lemon is as shrivelled as a mummy; there is no card for Miss Smith, and, touchy as she is, she must not be neglected; that stupid boy has left the letters on the hall-table, and there's only ten minutes to save the post.

Some such *contretemps* always drags out even those who have been most careful to take time by the forelock. But most people like to breathe as much as they can the bustling, bracing, jovial atmosphere of Christmas Eve, and so leave their shopping to the last. Many housekeepers make it quite a religious duty to see the Christmas beef, and squeeze the turkeys, and punch the sucking-pigs; and, besides all this, the thronging trains, laden with devotees flocking home to eat their Christmas-pudding, and the carts and vans packed with hampers and boxes and barrels, are quite enough, without any aid from marketers or loungers, to crowd the streets on Christmas Eve. At any rate, on this particular Christmas Eve, as the gloom deepened the throng increased.

But now let us quit the street and enter the nursery of a sombre, massive house, the front door of which bears a brass plate inscribed with the name of *Dr. Parker.* It is a large room at the top of the house, dark and low, with a small window and an uneven floor. The walls are covered with coloured pictures—'Beauty and the Beast,' 'Little Red Riding Hood,' 'The Children in the Wood,' and other treasures of illustrative art—and the floor is littered with toys of every conceivable description. Birds and beasts, emancipated from the confinement of the ark, sprawl in all directions, while Noah and his sons lie helplessly on their backs, powerless to restore discipline. A fallen house of wooden bricks has covered one corner with *débris.* A noble rocking-horse, with starting eyes, and scarlet lips, and horizontal tail, whose rider has recently dismounted, is still rocking with declining energy. A large doll, the victim of a recent accident or crime, has steeped a broken sofa in her heart's sawdust. The marbles of a solitaire-board, lurking here and there, threaten the unwary step with downfal. The

peculiar suffocating odour that fills the room is due to the martyrdom of a woolly dog, whose ashes are even now smouldering in the grate.

One's first impression on entering the room is that it is tenantless, but a second glance discovers the little birds who inhabit this disordered nest.

The sash of the window has been thrust down to its utmost extent, a low table has been pushed up against the sill, and on the table, half concealed from view, one by either curtain, stand a boy and a girl—a knickerbockered boy of about nine and a girl perhaps two years older.

They stand for two or three minutes silent and motionless; then, very cautiously, the boy bends his body forward, and peers down into the street.

'Now, Belle, quick!' he whispers.

The girl's arm steals out from the curtain. She has a small white basin in her hand. Carefully she raises it above the sash, grasping it firmly by the rim at the base, follows with her eyes the direction of the boy's finger, adroitly

reverses the basin, and the next instant boy and girl are safely ensconced behind their curtains.

A loud 'swish-h' is heard in the street. Then a confused murmur of voices.

'Bless my eyes!' 'Did anybody ever see the like of that?' 'Why, you're fair drownded, that you are!' 'I ain't a-goin' to stand this, anyways!' 'Where could it have come from?' 'From that winder, of course, you hignoramus!'

The next moment a fat, red-faced man, was pulling frantically at Dr. Parker's bell.

The door was answered by Mrs. Wolly, the nurse. In an ordinary way this good lady's duties were confined to looking after the children and their wardrobes, and to giving a little assistance in the general sewing of the house, but, under stress of the Christmas preparations, she had that day been pressed into the service of the cook. Mrs. Wolly's temper — at the best of times easily ruffled—had suffered seriously from the bustle of the kitchen. 'The way,' she said, 'in which she had been worrited, and fidgeted, and

moithered, and ordered about twenty ways at once by that cook, as (she didn't mind saying it) was no lady, and would be none the worse for being taken down a peg or two, was enough to have tried the patience of a saint, let alone hers, which was soon up and soon down, as was her father's afore her, and all the Badgerses.'

Consequently, when the cook requested Mrs. Wolly to answer the door (which again was like cook's himperence), Mrs. Wolly hastened to fulfil the duty with the firm intention of giving the imperious ringer a bit of her mind.

She flung the door open with a burst, and confronting the dripping and sputtering stranger exclaimed, 'Bless us, man! this ain't the Asylum nor yet the Engine-house! How dare you ring decent folkses' bells off the wires like that? For two pins I'd send for a constable and have you locked up, you hinsolent tatterdemalion!'

This heaping of insolence on the head of injury was too much for the man at the door. He could find no words scathing enough to

express his outraged feelings. He stood for a few moments motionless, the icy water trickling from the brim of his hat over his shoulders, his teeth chattering with cold, his face purple with indignation.

Then he strode up the steps, and shook his fist within an inch of Mrs. Wolly's nose. That good lady screamed, and tried to shut the door in his face. The man, however, intercepted its closing with his shoulder; and forcing his head through the aperture, to the serious detriment of his hat, found his voice at last to excellent purpose, and poured upon the terrified nurse a torrent of abuse.

'O you old cat! you scandalous old cat! ain't you ashamed of yourself? An old woman like you, too, as might know better, backing up them young imps in their outrageous goings-on! They pours a bucket of water on my head, a-wetting me to the blessed skin, and giving me my precious death of cold, to say nothing of spoiling my hat, as I give ten-and-six for the day before yesterday; and when I comes to complain, you gives me

nothing but sauce, and aggravation, and abuse! But you shall pay for it—you shall smart for it, you shall! I give you fair warning of that! I'll have the law of you, if I have to go to the House of Lords for it! O you old cat! you scandalous old cat!'

With the repetition of this choice phrase—in which his wounded feelings seemed to find a peculiarly grateful balm—the red-faced man extricated his arm, and suffered Mrs. Wolly to shut the door.

The nurse sat down for one minute on a chair in the hall to smooth her ruffled ribbons and feelings. Then, with all the alacrity possible to a person of her corpulence, she ascended the stairs to the nursery.

Despite the admitted fact of their being 'regular little Pickles,' Mrs. Wolly was strongly attached to her two charges. She often made grave complaints to Mrs. Parker of their 'unchristian pranks' and 'powder-monkey games.' Sighing in a comfortable fat way, she would assert that they were 'wearing her to a shadder.' Once or twice, under the irritation of some

peculiarly aggravated piece of mischief, she had gone so far as to give notice; but when, a few hours later, the fit of naughtiness had passed over, and the children had become all gentleness and affection, the threat had been recalled, and she had declared that she couldn't live apart from 'them precious cherubs.' But now she opened the nursery-door in fierce indignation, determined to visit the culprits with punishment prompt and exemplary.

Mrs. Parker had gone out for the afternoon. In wishing the children good-bye, she had told them that if they were very good and quiet nurse would give them cake for tea, and that Belle should be allowed to use her new doll's-tea-service for the first time. Both these high favours Mrs. Wolly determined should be revoked; and as the children were so fond of water, water they should have for tea, and dry bread to accompany it.

In wrathful majesty, with head thrown back, loud respiration, and terror-striking glance, Mrs. Wolly entered the room. Her eyes sought the window, where she expected to see the Pickles

plotting against the peace of other of her Majesty's liege subjects; but the blind was pulled down and the window was shut, and no Pickles were lurking in its precincts. The fire was burning low, and the room was in half-darkness. No children were to be seen.

'Miss Belle and Master 'Enery Cecil!' exclaimed Mrs. Wolly, like a general summoning a garrison to surrender.

No response.

Mrs. Wolly advanced two steps, and nearly came to grief on a marble. This was unfortunate; it detracted sadly from the dignity of her entrance.

'Miss Belle! do you hear me?'

Silence.

'Master 'Enery Cecil! speak to me this moment, sir!'

Still silence.

The nurse advanced one more step, and then stopped. She was haunted by the dread that the children were lurking privily somewhere, and would suddenly shoot up and grip her by the ankles. This was a very

favourite pastime of Cecil's, but not of Mrs. Wolly's.

Had the children, conscience-stricken, run away and hidden themselves in their bedrooms?

Mrs. Wolly was just beginning to think that this must be the explanation of that rebellious silence, when there fell on her ear the very last sound in the world that she expected to hear.

She listened. The sound was repeated. There was no mistaking its nature.

It was a snore!

She stepped forward and bent over the sofa. There, locked in each other's arms, the very picture of sleeping innocence, lay the two little Pickles.

And so the red-faced man's charge against the children was a baseless slander! Either the man was mad or tipsy, or else it was that young monkey of Jones's next door who had forced upon him that unwelcome ablution. At any rate her little pets were clearly innocent. Poor things! they had real tricks enough to answer for, without having pretended ones laid

to their charge! It was all plain enough. They had been romping and shouting for hours past, until at length even their irrepressible spirits had given way, and, lying down to rest on the sofa, they had fallen asleep.

How calm and sweet they looked in their slumbers! Could it be possible that these bright-haired cherubs, with their soft cheeks pressed together, their arms twined round each other's neck, their heavy, drooping lashes, their half-parted lips, their low and regular breathing, were those terrible desperadoes who had tied that string across the entry, whereby Mrs. Gibbs, the laundress, had been propelled upon her much-respected head? who had placed the batter-pudding in the Rector's hat? who had hidden Juno's litter of five puppies in Grandmamma's bed?

Although these heinous offences had, one and all, been brought home to the Pickles within the last six weeks, and, indeed, had been confessed by them, confronted by such evidence of innocence as that borne by their sleeping faces, Mrs. Wolly found it hard to believe that

any mischief had been, should, or could be, perpetrated by 'them guileless lambs.'

That they were absolutely innocent of that cold-water-cure trick she was prepared to maintain in the teeth of twenty red-faced men. Probably Jones's boy was the culprit; at any rate, it would be well to box his ears next time she met him.

She stooped softly, and kissed the boy and girl, then turned and stole on tiptoe towards the door.

She was just leaving the room when a sponge loaded with water—a large, honeycomb bath sponge—whirled through space, showering spray in its flight, and caught the beaming broadside of her cheek.

Flop! swop! drop!

A sound as if all the fountains of the deep were breaking up! A sensation as if they were rushing into her left ear! She was struck deaf, and dumb, and motionless. She could just gasp—that was her utmost achievement. The Pickles had sprung from their lair, and were dancing round her with maniaca shrieks of delight.

At the end of thirty seconds she was equal to faltering, 'O my gracious!' At the end of a minute she was able to turn round and swoop to her revenge.

But of this she was balked by a masterly retreat on the part of the Pickles.

Opposite to the door by which Mrs. Wolly was retiring when the little wretches rose from their weasel-sleep, and one of them—it was Belle, if you want to know—hurled that sousing missile, was another door, leading through a short passage to two bedrooms and a lumber-room appropriated to the children and their nurse, and, a little farther on, to the backstairs. Through this door, on the first symptoms of Mrs. Wolly's recovering her faculties, and long before she had succeeded in turning about her bulky person, Belle and Cecil disappeared, slamming it behind them; and just as the nurse, in hot pursuit, grasped the handle, a sharp click on the other side announced that the door was locked.

Mrs. Wolly was too angry to risk more 'himperence' by summoning the rebels to

surrender. She merely put her lips to the keyhole and said, in a thrilling whisper, 'Wait till your mamma comes home!' With these ominous words she descended to the kitchen, to recount to the ladies below-stairs the harrowing story of the latest enormity of 'them mischievous young apes.' Having dried her cap at the fire, and drunk a cup of tea, and stuck a piece of cotton-wool in her ear, she awaited with severe dignity Mrs. Parker's return and the opportunity of telling her wrongs.

CHAPTER II.

BED.

MEANWHILE the children, within their entrenchment, their first burst of hilarity at their double success having exhausted itself, began to feel a little uneasy as to the consequences of their tricks.

Mrs. Parker was a very fond and very indulgent mother; but she could be severe when severity was necessary, and even the culprits themselves could hardly help admitting that it was necessary now. Moreover, it was about tea-time, and Belle began to think regretfully of the tea-service that she was to have used, and Cecil of the promised cake.

Both these privileges were clearly forfeited. Indeed, their getting any tea at all that night was extremely doubtful. Emptying the basin

and throwing the sponge had been charming at the time, but the brief delight seemed dearly bought at the price of the loss of their tea now, and of unknown pains and penalties when their mamma came home. They looked at one another with awe-stricken faces.

'You threw it,' said Cecil.

'Yes; but you told me to,' retorted Belle.

'You're the eldest—you ought to have known better.'

'Well, if I hadn't thrown it, you would; you know you said you would—so come.'

'Mamma says I'm as good as gold when I'm by myself.'

'Nurse says it's you that put all the mischief into my head.'

Let me here remark that both Mamma and nurse were perfectly right. Cecil, unseduced by Belle, was everything that could be desired. Nothing could be more admirable—unless it were Belle removed from Cecil's perverting counsels. These two young people, in fact, resembled a seidlitz-powder. The white paper alone never disturbs the tranquillity of

the water, nor does the blue; but immerse the white and the blue together, and forthwith, 'fiz! p-sss-h!'—a mighty effervescence takes place.

This little attempt to lay the blame each on the other's shoulders was not at all like our children's usual conduct, for courage and generosity were conspicuous traits in the character of both.

Cecil was ashamed of himself in a minute, and spoke up stoutly.

'I'll take half of the blame.'

'And I'll take the other half,' Belle readily replied.

This determination was very satisfactory as far as it went, and immediately restored the children to their usual affectionate footing. Still they could not help thinking that, however desirably the blame were apportioned, there would be a liberal share for each of them.

'I wish we had not done it,' said Belle.

'You never saw such a cake!' replied Cecil. 'I saw it in the pantry, and I chipped a corner

off it. Oh, it was scrumptious! such candied peel!'

'You horrid, greedy boy! you're always thinking about things to eat! It's not the cake I mind—it's the tea-service.' Belle's voice grew a little unsteady, and a tear wormed itself into the corner of one eye.

'Never mind, Belle; you can have the tea-service another time. The service will keep, you know; only I'm afraid they'll eat the cake downstairs.'

There was silence for a little time, while both were busy with their thoughts—anything but pleasant thoughts, I promise you. At length Belle said;

'I hope he won't catch cold.'

'Who won't?'

'Why that poor man that—that *had* the water on his head.'

'Oh, not he! it won't hurt him!' said Cecil, with a small attempt at bravado. 'Cold water's good for everybody.'

'When you're a little older, you'll know that a basin of water emptied on your head's

a dreadful dangerous thing—when you're in a perspiration. I dare say he was in a perspiration—oh, I'm sure he was in a perspiration !'

Belle's remorse was deepening. Cecil surveyed with awe the emotion of his sister, and could think of nothing appropriate to say.

'He might catch his death of cold!' said Belle, pursuing this gloomy train of thought.

'Oh, never mind that—if that's all,' Cecil broke in, cheerfully. 'I've caught my death of cold lots of times, and it isn't at all bad. Once it gave me croup, though,' he added, recollecting.

'And dear nurse's ear, too! Oh, how wicked we were, Cecil! I do hope she put some cotton-wool in it.'

'When I get my 'lowance on Wednesday I'll buy a whole lot of it.'

'What?'

'Cotton-wool—so as she may have it ready if it should happen another time.'

'You won't get any allowance—don't think it. Our allowance was stopped for the puppies, and they weren't half so bad as this.'

At this moment there came a ring at the front-door bell.

'That's Mamma!' they cried together, staring at each other with faces of blank alarm.

They listened with palpitating hearts, but the ring was followed by no step on the stairs, and so a painful reprieve was granted.

The passage where they were still sitting was now quite dark.

'I wonder what time it is?' said Cecil: 'we must have been here for hours and hours!' (Half-an-hour was, in fact, the utmost period of their sojourn.) 'I wonder if we shall get any supper?'

'Not one morsel!' replied Belle, decisively; 'and I dare say no breakfast neither—we don't deserve any.'

'No, we don't,' Cecil ruefully assented; 'but I *should* like some. Juno buries her bones when she doesn't want to eat them at the time; I shall bury my bread and butter after this.'

'I wonder what Mamma will say?'

'"Children, what is this I hear?"—that's how she'll begin.'

'"You've given a poor old man his death of cold and——"'

'He wasn't old, Belle.'

'Oh, that's childish, Cecil. You know he *might* have been ever so old.'

'Then she'll say, "I'll talk to you in the morning; now go to bed."'

'I wonder if she *would* send us to bed?' mused Belle.

'Of course she will. She did for the batter-pudding, and for the string in the entry.'

'I suppose she would,' said Belle, thinking aloud. Then, to her brother, 'We ought to do just what Mamma would like, so we had better send ourselves to bed.'

'Go to bed ourselves?'

'Yes, dear. Poor Mamma will come in very tired, and if we're nicely in bed before she comes it will save her the trouble of sending us.'

The idea seemed a novel and happy one, and the children acted upon it with much alacrity. They first of all heard one another say

their prayers; then, having kissed and said good-night, they retired to their respective rooms, and began the work of disrobing.

For a little time after they were in bed they kept up through the open doors of their rooms a running fire of conversation on the engrossing subject of their thoughts—the punishment in store for them. After an interval rather longer than usual, Belle's remark elicited no reply from her brother. His regular breathing explained the silence. He was asleep. So Belle turned on her side and soon followed him into the world of shadows.

An hour later, Mrs. Parker, a little amused and a good deal vexed, entered the nursery to pass sentence on the Pickles.

'You naughty, mischievous children!' she said. 'What is this I hear? Go to bed this minute!'

The opening of the door had aroused Belle, always a light sleeper.

'We are in bed, Mamma dear,' she cried from her chamber. 'We thought you would send us, as we'd been so naughty, and so we

went ever so long ago. We've both had a very good night.'

This ingenuous explanation was too much for Mrs. Parker's gravity. She merely wished her girl good-night, and retired hastily, reserving further measures for the morning.

CHAPTER III.

CHRISTMAS DAY.

THE children got off much better than they deserved or expected. Their having voluntarily gone to bed was accepted by both Mrs. Parker and Mrs. Wolly as a strongly extenuating circumstance; but what most blunted the sword of Justice was the next day's being Christmas Day. On that day it was impossible for any body to remain in disgrace; and so, after a few words of reproach on their first appearance in the morning, Belle and Cecil were restored to favour and the privileges of the day.

Father Christmas had not forgotten either of them. There was half-a-sovereign each from Grandmamma. Mamma gave Belle a charming little writing-case, fitted up in the completest possible manner; and Cecil a knife, that

was at once a knife, a corkscrew, a saw, a file, and I don't know how many things besides—an instrument that, as Cecil observed, would have just suited the Swiss Family Robinson. Papa gave them each a pair of acme skates. In addition to these more important presents, each had several little remembrances from aunts and cousins, and Belle had eleven, and Cecil nine, Christmas cards.

At breakfast, in addition to the customary bread and milk, they were regaled with coffee and hot roll—a liberality of diet which their abstinence overnight peculiarly qualified them to appreciate.

After breakfast they amused themselves with their new treasures till it was time to get ready for church. At a little before eleven they set out with their mamma. Dr. Parker—for doctors have no holidays—had been called out an hour before to see a distant patient—a great disappointment to his wife and himself, as, of all days in the year, they were most anxious to attend church together on Christmas Day. However, it was pleasant to think that the work

on which the Doctor was engaged was one very dear to Him Whose birth we celebrate on Christmas Day.

There had been a sharp touch of frost during the night, and the streets were in rather better walking order than on the day before. The cold air kindled the complexions of the children into a delightful rosy glow, and as they walked briskly, yet decorously, one on either side of Mrs. Parker—Cecil, brave in the roughest and longest of Ulsters and the gayest of scarlet stockings, gallantly carrying the ladies' Prayer-books; Belle, in ermine-trimmed jacket, her small hands hidden in the jauntiest of muffs, her bright hair rustling on her shoulders, looking for all the world like the good fairy of Christmas—many heads were turned back admiringly, and one lady was overheard saying to a chubby rebel, with pouting lips and cheeks smeared with tears, whom she was dragging along, 'There, Mortimer, look at that little lady and gentleman. They never kick nurse when she's getting them ready for church, I'm sure. They're never naughty or

troublesome. It's a pleasure to look at children like that.'

Mrs. Parker smiled, and the Pickles exchanged guilty glances. Unmerited praise is the severest of all rebukes.

St. Matthew's Church is a heavy and unlovely structure, built at that stupid period when ugliness in church architecture was considered venerable, and when the dull and forbidding exterior of the building represented aptly enough the doctrines taught within. Nowadays we know better. Jaques, in the Forest of Arden, found 'sermons in stones.' Modern Christians think that stones never preach so fine a sermon as when they are piled together to build a beautiful house for the worship of God—believe that He Who made flowers, and sunsets, and seas, and mountains, loves beauty, and is never so fitly worshipped as in the fairest fabric that man's device can fashion.

But, bad as was the material they had to work upon, the decorators of St. Matthew's had contrived to make it look bright and season-

able this Christmas Day. The heavy galleries and thick, stunted pillars, were festooned with wreaths of ivy and holly, while over the chancel-arch was inscribed, in letters of evergreen, the evergreen good news of God's good will to men.

Our little party had hardly taken their places when the organ pealed out, and the choir entered, singing, 'O come, all ye faithful.'

The children, who, like all children, sometimes found the service long and tedious, by no means found it so to-day. Some holy and happy influence was at work in their hearts; and though they could not fully understand the prayers, they felt their solemn and majestic beauty. They felt that 'that place was dreadful,' that it was 'none other but the house of God and the gate of heaven.' Something, too, of the special message of Christmas Day found its way to their hearts. They were able to understand that even they, children as they were, needed a Saviour, and that to them was born that day a Saviour, which was Christ the Lord. They left the church, sobered, yet glad-

dened, and the happy influence stayed with them through the day.

After church came dinner, with a turkey fine enough to deserve stuffing—and it was stuffed, too—and a plum-pudding, spiky as a porcupine with peeled almonds, and quivering with blue flame.

After dinner they had nuts and oranges in the nursery, and then they played with their toys till tea-time. Then Mamma told them stories and read to them, and so nine o'clock came before they knew where they were. Then biscuits, and good-night, and to bed; and so ended this quiet and happy Christmas Day.

You will say this is a dull chapter, my reader. Well, so it is, I must confess. I have been tempted to relate rather fully the doings of one quiet day, because so few of our Pickles' days were quiet that I didn't know how long it might be before I got the chance again. The subsequent chapters will show the Pickles picklish enough, I promise you.

CHAPTER IV.

THE COMPLETE LETTER-WRITER.

THE Feast of St. Stephen, as it is known to ecclesiastics—or Boxing Day, as it is known to frequenters of pantomimes in particular and to the public in general—had been fixed a fortnight ago by Mrs. Parker as the day for giving a dinner-party that had been a long time in contemplation. The party, all told, would number fourteen. The Parkers were by no means in the habit of giving formal entertainments, though more hospitable and friendly folks were not to be found. A dozen extra people cannot, according to the notions of modern society, sit down at our dining-table without an earthquake in the kitchen, whose shock is painfully apparent in the upper regions.

From these shocks the Doctor shrank nervously. He liked to bring home with him any chance friend that he might run against in the

course of his day's work to take 'pot-luck'—generally very good luck, by-the-by—and to keep him company in the one cigar which he allowed himself after dinner. He was always pleased to be told by Mrs. Parker that their party at dinner was to be increased from two to four. 'By all means let us entertain our friends,' he used to say; 'but by twos, not by dozens.' His wife used to meet his views in the matter as far as possible, but occasionally—two or three times in the course of the year—it became necessary to break through the rule, and to give a regular dinner-party.

Boxing Day, then, had been fixed as the occasion of one of these—to the Doctor—sad festivities. He left home in the morning with a heavy heart, conscious that instead of the nice little dinner, the cigar, the *Times*, the poem or novel read aloud by his wife, the half-hour's talk with the Pickles, which usually formed the solace of the day's fatigue and anxiety, he was that evening doomed to two hours' hard eating and harder talking of small talk, without a cigar, and with, probably, a touch of indigestion.

Mrs. Parker had, of course, a good deal to arrange that day. Miss Baker—the daily governess, whose hard lot it was to direct the studies of our Pickles—was now enjoying her well-earned vacation; Mrs. Wolly was again required to lend a hand in the kitchen. Hence it came to pass that the children were left very much to their own devices. Mrs. Parker came into the nursery after breakfast and set them to work at writing letters of thanks to Grandmamma and the other kind donors of Christmas presents. But beyond this fair start, and an occasional flying visit from Mrs. Wolly, they were left in undisturbed possession of their time and of the nursery.

'*My dear Grandmamma,*

'*I am very much obliged to you for the writing-case. It is a very nice writing-case, and I am writing this letter with it. I like writing-cases very much, and this is a very nice writing-case. I hope you are quite well. I am quite well, and so is Cecil. Wishing you a happy new year,*

'*I remain, my dear Grandmamma,*

'*Yours affectionately,*

'ISABELLA F. PARKER.'

So far Belle did pretty well. The 'writing-case,' to be sure, came in rather oftener than she could have wished; but all of my readers who have written a letter by themselves (by themselves, mind; that makes all the difference) know how obstinate and troublesome words are —how they will push themselves in when you don't want them; and how, when you do want them, they are nowhere to be found—and will be able to make allowances for our young lady.

Cecil was very bold and fluent as far as 'My dear Grandmamma;' but there his powers of expression failed him, and, having chewed two penholders and a square of ink-eraser without deriving any inspiration from the process, he abandoned the idea of striking out a line for himself, and consented to tread humbly in Belle's footsteps.

With the exception of two blots and an unnecessary *t* in 'much,' his progress was quite satisfactory till the end of the second line. But there he fell into a pitfall. He had just tacked on the *e* of 'case'—a fine gentlemanly *e*, upstroke very thin, downstroke very thick, loop

delightfully free and open—when, on pausing to admire this graceful bit of workmanship, it flashed across his mind that his copy was all too faithful—he was thanking his grandmamma for a writing-case instead of a knife! Belle was nearly at the end of her first page, and would be 'I remain'-ing in another minute. It was hard to have to begin at the beginning again. However, there was no help for it. He took another sheet of paper, squeezed his tongue out of the left corner of his mouth, twined his legs round the legs of the chair, and in another minute had again left his 'Dear Grandmamma' behind.

'Put "knife" instead of "writing-case" all the way through,' he muttered aloud; 'that's all I've got to do.'

He was very careful, in every instance, to make the change, and got on so swimmingly altogether that the end was beginning to appear by no means a hopeless goal, when Belle—who had blotted her letter and addressed the envelope—looking over her brother's shoulder, suddenly exclaimed,—

'Why, you stupid boy! what are you saying?'

'What's the matter? There's only one *r* in "very," is there?'

'Of course there isn't! But just hear this:—"It is a very nice knife, and I am writing this letter with it!"'

'Oh, dear!' sighed Cecil, wearily, 'what am I to do? I *can't* write it all over again, my hand aches so; and it has made me quite stiff all down my back, and I can't move my neck, and——'

'Never mind, Cecil, I'll help you; and you'll soon get through it.'

'Oh, if you'll help me, I don't mind.'

He took a fresh sheet and a good dip of ink (his thumb and two next fingers were blacker than a Christy Minstrel's), and prepared once again to traverse the long and weary road.

This time, with Belle's benevolent assistance, he really finished his task, and without any mistakes, except one little one at the very end. This, however—only the omission of a single letter—altered the sense a good deal, and made

him wish his grandmamma 'a happy new ear.' Now this expression—old Mrs. Parker being a little deaf—was felt to be somewhat unfortunate, and Cecil, the moment his attention was called to it, took a liberal splash of ink, with intent to supply the missing *y*.

Alack, alack, and well-a-day! how am I to tell the lamentable tale? Excess of ardour ruined the good cause. Instead of the intended *y*, there gushed upon the paper a great, flopping, swopping blot—a prodigious blot—a blot big enough to drown a daddy-long-legs! Blotting-paper was of no avail. The inky pool *would* not be mopped up. The more Cecil tore off little bits of blotting-paper and launched them, like pink boats, upon the black sea, the further the dismal tide extended. The 'new ear' was swamped in no time; then the 'very nice knife' disappeared; and, last of all, in spite of frantic efforts for her rescue, Cecil's 'Dear Grandmother' was submerged.

When that crowning catastrophe took place, the boy—who had kept his heart up gallantly hitherto—suddenly gave way, and, letting his

face sink upon the paper, his nose in the very deepest pool, sobbed in bitterness of soul. His tears raised the tide considerably, and gave the little sea the salt savour that it lacked.

In a moment Belle's kind arms were round his neck, and Belle's fond lips were kissing his smeared and inky cheeks.

'Never mind, darling. Don't cry — please don't cry. I'll write the letter for you—I'll ask Mamma if I may—and you can sign it, you know, "Henry Cecil Parker," in your best and biggest hand. And after that Mamma will let us go a little walk, because your poor head aches. Doesn't it, dear?'

'Yes, it does; all of me aches,' said Cecil, sighing, and drying his eyes. 'When I'm a man I'll never write letters.'

You think Cecil a great baby, don't you, my accomplished reader, for crying over a bit of a letter like that? Well, you know, everybody can't be expected to be so clever as you. He was not a baby, I assure you. He would bark his shins and elbows, he would raise bumps on the back of his head as big as magnum-

bonum plums, and would pick himself up and go on with his game again, without so much as a whimper. He could take a header off the springing-board, and swim twice the length of Sussex Street Baths. There was not a boy of his own size in England that would not have got Cecil's knuckles on his nose if he had said one rude word to Belle. But he had been rather kept back in his lessons—being a delicate child a year or two ago, though now strong enough for anything—and a letter was to him a serious undertaking. And when he saw his third copy—such a beautiful copy, too—swamped and ruined, why, of course he cried. I should have done the same myself, I dare say.

Belle ran downstairs to ask her mother's permission to act as Cecil's secretary; and, when his letter should be written, to take it, with her own, to the post.

She soon reappeared.

'It's all right,' she cried. 'Mamma says we may go out as soon as ever I've finished your letter, and she's given us leave to spend some of our money. She's going to be very

busy all day, and we're to amuse ourselves in our own way, and not come troubling her. Oh, we'll have such fun!'

'Won't we just! But come on, Belle, and knock this nasty letter off.'

The letter was soon written, signed, and enclosed in Belle's envelope. Then Cecil struggled into his Ulster, and put the letter in his pocket. In a couple of minutes Belle was arrayed in her smart out-of-door things.

'How much shall you take with you, Cecil?' she asked, re-entering the nursery.

'I've only got fourpence besides Grandmamma's half-sovereign. Fourpence might not be enough, you know, so I shall take the whole lot.'

'I shall take my half-sovereign, too, then. Shall I put yours in my purse for you?'

'All right. You won't lose it, will you?'

The money had been placed in Belle's writing-case for temporary security. Mrs. Parker intended placing it, on the first opportunity, in the Post Office Savings Bank, where—thanks to kind relations—the Pickles had

quite a nice little fortune deposited. In giving them permission to spend some of their money, I need not say that the circumstance of their having so large an amount in hand had escaped their mother's memory.

The money was transferred from Belle's writing-case to her purse, and, without more ado, the children set out. First of all, the letter was dropped into a pillar just across the way, and then they stepped out briskly in the direction of the shops which were favoured with their custom.

CHAPTER V.

THE PICKLES.ISSUE INVITATIONS.

As they walked up Nelson Street—a solemn, respectable street, vulgarised by very few shops —Cecil, whose spirits had quite recovered from their temporary depression, kept chatting gaily to his sister. To his various remarks, however, he received only very short answers, and sometimes no answer at all. But in his present mood Cecil required very little encouragement to talk, and it was not for some minutes that he noticed his sister's taciturnity.

At length a 'Yes' came from her to a question so obviously requiring a 'No,' that Cecil could not help observing that she was not attending to what he said.

'Why don't you listen, Belle?' he asked. 'There's nothing the matter, is there? You're

not cross because you had to write my letter?'

'Of course I'm not! I didn't mind writing the letter a bit. There's nothing the matter at all. I'm only thinking.'

'What are you thinking about? Tell me.'

'Why, you know Mamma said we were to amuse ourselves in our own way to-night. Everybody will be downstairs, and we shall have the nursery all to ourselves. Well, don't you see, we ought to do something awfully nice to-night.'

'Let's play hide-and-seek.'

'What, that stale old game? I know everywhere you can hide.'

'Let's play at Queen Mary, and burn your doll alive.'

'Burn "Little Dorrit?" No, indeed, poor darling! How would *you* like having all your wax melted? Besides, I've got a splendid idea. We'll have a ball.'

'What's the good of that? I've got lots of balls—that big india-rubber one, and——'

'Don't be silly! I mean a party—not a regular ball, but just a few friends.'

'All right. Who shall we ask?'

'Well, Cecil, don't you think Augustus is a very nice boy? We might ask him.'

Augustus, let me explain, was the young gentleman who might be seen, in the morning, with a green-baize apron round his waist, cleaning knives and boots in Dr. Parker's scullery, or carrying out bottles of physic, and, later in the day, in a trim, tight-fitting jacket, studded with silver buttons as thickly as a summer sky with stars, opening the door to Dr. Parker's patients.

'Oh, yes,' Cecil replied, eagerly, 'let's ask Augustus. I like Augustus awfully. He *can* whistle! Have you ever seen him play at ball with papa's Wellington boots? We'll ask him to do that to-night. It's grand!'

'Then there's Jones's boy.'

'Oh, he'd never do—he's got red hair, and he squints.'

'He can't help that, can he? It's not his fault. Besides, it's not a regular squint; it's only a cast in his eye. Nurse says we ought to love people with red hair and casts in their eyes.'

'*She* doesn't love him. You don't call boxing his ears with a reticule loving him, do you? She gave him two regular stingers for spitting peas. But it wasn't him all the while —it was me and Augustus.'

'Oh, then, we *must* ask him. That settles it. The poor boy's ears were boxed unjustly, and the least thing we can do, I'm sure, by way of making up to him, is to ask him to the party.'

'Very well, if you like. You won't care about him, though, I know. You never saw anything like his nails. They're as black as——'

'Well, he must clean them before he comes —that's all. Let me see. Ourselves, and Augustus, and Jones's boy—that's four. My tea-service is for six. We shall want two more.'

'Who else shall we have? Freddy and Annie Vincent?'

'Well, no, Cecil. You see this is not quite a select gathering, and the Vincents are very particular. If you don't mind having all boys——'

'Not I. I hate girls! Girls are such stupids. They're always getting hurt, and they like such slow old games—skipping-ropes and kiss-in-the-ring. I don't mean you, Belle. You're as good as a boy any day; but other girls are no good.'

'Well, then, I know what will do capitally. We can ask Augustus and Jones's boy to bring a friend each, and that will just make up the party.'

'I say, Belle, Mamma will have to give us lots of things to eat. Augustus does tuck in! I've seen him have his lunch in the scullery. He eats it with his pocket-knife—a great lump of bread—oh, I don't know how big! And bacon—such fat bacon! And he puts in such big pieces his cheeks bulge out like a German band. And he smacks his lips, and makes great gobbles when he eats, and he gurgles when he drinks—and it's the same knife that he digs worms with!'

'Oh, what a horrid boy!'

'Horrid? Not a bit of it. I like to see Augustus have his dinner. It's as good as

seeing the beasts fed — sixpence extra, you know.'

'Well, we can't ask Mamma to give us all the things we shall want. There'll be fourteen at dinner to-night; and she'll want everything she's got, and more, for them. Besides, I want *our* party to be a kind of secret—a pleasant little surprise for her. "Mamma," we can say, "guess what we did yesterday?" And then she'll never guess, and we shall have to tell her; and she'll say, "Oh, that was capital! I want you to be a famous little housekeeper, Belle; and that's just the way to learn."'

'We must buy a stock of things, then, I suppose. Come on, let's go to Gamble's. Gamble's is the best shop I ever knew. You can get anything you want at Gamble's—tripe, and balls of string, and theatres, and sweets, and jam, and nails, and eggs.'

'All right. We'll go to Gamble's.'

A bend in the street, a hundred yards higher up, brought the Pickles within sight of the row of shops, of which Gamble's was a conspicuous ornament.

Lo, shutters! nothing but shutters! a wilderness of shutters!

'Goodness!' exclaimed the two children, in a breath; 'why, it's Sunday!'

'No, it can't be Sunday, though,' mused Belle; 'yesterday was Christmas Day, and Christmas Day was on Tuesday. Oh, I know! it's Bank Holiday!'

'Well, the shops are all closed, anyhow. We can't buy a thing, Belle. Isn't it a sell?'

'It's too bad of the Bank. If it does want a holiday to count its great heaps of money, the greedy thing! why need it make all the shops close, too?'

'I wish Gamble's had a night-bell, like Papa's. It's no good, Belle. We shall have to put the party off.'

'Oh, no, we can't do that! I've set my heart on having the party to-night. Besides, we shall never have such an opportunity again. Come on, Cecil; let's wander about. We might find some shop or other open, though I'm afraid the Bank won't let *one* of them.'

'I'll ask Papa to speak to the Bank. I say,

Belle, wouldn't it serve it right if we took our money out? Six pounds thirteen of yours and five pounds nine and twopence of mine. It would make the Bank look queer, wouldn't it, if we came with a sack and carried the whole lot away at one go?'

After many a random and fruitless turning down streets at once crowded with holiday-makers and melancholy with the gloom of closed shutters, patience triumphed. Far down a back-street the gleam of a bow-window—evidently a shop-window—blessed the Pickles' sight.

'Hurrah!' cried Cecil: 'come along, Belle.'

In another half-minute two pairs of eyes were scanning eagerly the wares displayed in the window.

It was just the shop they wanted—a huckster's, and a formidable rival of Gamble's in the range of its attractions. Bulls'-eyes, and mops, and all intermediate temptations, assailed the public from J. W. TOPPIN'S bow-window. One important element in Mr. Toppin's business was the sale of tobacco and cigars, and it was

probably with a view to catching the holiday people, to whom Wills's birdseye and real Havana cigars (seven for a shilling) appealed, that he kept his establishment open on Bank Holiday.

The Pickles entered the shop.

'Well, Miss, what can I do for you?' enquired the shopkeeper—Toppin himself, gorgeous in a sealskin waistcoat, and smoking one of his own Havanas.

'We're giving a party to-night,' Belle replied, 'and we want a few little things, such as sugar and tea, and tea-cakes, and——'

'And toast,' put in Cecil.

'Yes, and toast, and jam, and——'

'Certainly, Miss. Any eggs, Miss?'

'Oh, yes: poached eggs, please.'

'We don't keep them ready poached, Miss; you can do that at home, you know—at your own residence.'

'Oh, very well. And we must have some ham to eat with them. How many hams do you think we shall want?'

'Will it be a large party, Miss?'

'Well—no—not a *very* large one.'

'About how many people—twenty or thirty? If you'll let me know the number, I can judge according to the computation.'

Now Belle felt that hitherto she had been treated with great respect. Toppin could not have been much more deferential if she had been a grown-up lady. The sense of importance was delightful, and she felt that if in reply to his question she informed Mr. Toppin that the party, all told, would number only six, she would sink considerably in his estimation.

She replied evasively. 'Not quite so many as twenty, I think—no, certainly, not so many. Just a nice little party, you know.'

'Quite so, Miss. Just a little friendly gathering of a social and convivial nature. I understand. Well, Miss, I think one ham will go round very nicely.'

'Then there'll be bread,' said Cecil.

'We shan't want much bread if we have bread-and-butter, and toast, and tea-cakes. Two or three loaves will be quite enough, I think.'

'Candles, Miss? Nothing like throwing a good light on the subject, you know—adds greatly to the festivity of the festive occasion.'

'Yes; just a few pounds of candles, and——' Belle's eyes travelled round the shop in search of suggestions. 'Then there'll be biscuits,' she said, prompted by two or three tins on the counter. And—any toffee, do you think, Cecil?'

'Oh, yes!' replied Cecil, glad to be consulted; 'toffee by all means! and candied peel, and nutmegs, and lemons, and—mops, Belle? any mops?'

'No, not this afternoon, I think; nor nails, nor lard. A little cheese, perhaps; and—really, I think that'll be all.'

'Very well, Miss. You see, when I'm putting the things up, if I think of anything that has evaded the memory in the hurry of the moment, I can just slip in as much as is likely to be required.'

'Oh, thank you; it's very kind of you to take so much trouble. I shall tell my papa how obliging you have been, and I'm sure he'll always deal here.'

'You are very good, Miss; and I'm very much gratified by your appreciation. Perhaps you'll kindly take a few of my business-cards, and distribute them among your distinguished guests to-night. And where shall I send the things, Miss?'

'Miss Parker, 23 Nelson Street.'

'Oh, yes—Dr. Parker's—very eminent medical practitioner. The things shall follow you in a brace of shakes, in fact with all possible expedition.'

'Isn't he a nice man?' whispered Cecil, as he followed his sister out of the shop.

'Delightful!' replied Belle. 'So *very* gentlemanly!'

CHAPTER VI.

J. W. TOPPIN SENDS IN HIS LITTLE BILL.

ABOUT an hour after the successful conclusion of Belle's first essay in housekeeping, Augustus, with a Wellington boot covering, like a gauntlet, his left hand and wrist, was amusing himself with a quiet game at 'chuck' in the back-kitchen. Hearing steps approaching, the young gentleman slipped the marbles into his trowsers pocket, seized the blacking-brush, and began scrubbing away with an energy quite refreshing to behold. A moment later, discovering that it was no one in authority, but only his very good friend, Cecil, who had disturbed his innocent pastime, Augustus gave the brush another little holiday, and greeted his visitor with a nod, a wink, and a broad grin.

Cecil, however, had not come, as he some-

times did, to refer to his elder some difficult problem in top-spinning or kite-flying, nor to while away a few slow minutes with the charms of refined conversation. He merely thrust a note into Augustus' ebony fist, performed on one leg a few steps of excitement and triumph, and saying, 'You're to read that, and I'll come for the answer in a minute,' darted back into his own regions.

Augustus turned the envelope over and over in much perplexity, at every turn imparting to it a deeper border of mourning. He read the superscription,—

'*Master Agustus* ———, *Esq^re*,'

three or four times, and then, slowly and solemnly inserting the tip of his forefinger into the aperture at one extremity of the envelope, he gradually traversed the whole length of the lappet, and finally squeezed out of that most mysterious envelope its more mysterious enclosure.

Guided by his forefinger, and spelling the longer words aloud, at the end of a quarter of an hour Augustus had pretty well mastered

the contents of the first letter he had ever received.

'*Miss Isabella F. and Master Henry Cecil Parker present their complements to Master Agustus* ———, *Esq^re, and Requests the pleasure of his company to tea at a quarter past* 7 *o'clock. Please come up the back-stairs. There will be tea-cakes, and Jam, and* ever *so many other things. Jones's Boy is expected, and if you know another very nice boy who does not use Bad langage, nor anything of that sort, please bring him with you.*

'*I remain,*

'*Yours truly,*

'ISABELLA F. PARKER *and*
HENRY CECIL PARKER.

R.S.V.P.

'*P.S.—An answer will oblige.*

'*P.S.—Give your hands a Nice washing, Agustus, if you please, and bring your pocket-hankerchief.*'

Returning for his answer by the time that Augustus had got a clear view of the drift of the letter, Cecil found the young gentleman much gratified by the invitation. He questioned Cecil with lively interest as to what there would be for tea, and on learning that there was to be

a whole ham, as well as lots of eggs, he declared that it was worth while running some risk in such a cause as that. The back-stairs were handy. He thought that, by watching his chance, he might slip in unobserved through the garden-door, and, after that, there was only a short lobby to pass, and then those stairs were gained, which, issuing upon the Pickles' own regions, made the rest of his passage tolerably secure.

Then, as to the friend whom he was asked to bring. He knew the very chap—as nice a young gentleman as you'd find in all Copplestoke, though shy, and, by reason of his shyness, somewhat apt to send his victuals down the wrong way. This young gentleman, he felt sure, he would find free to attend an entertainment at which ham and eggs were expected. He knew where to lay his hands on the young gentleman at any time in the day, and if, as seemed likely, he should be sent, during the afternoon, on any kind of errand, he would slip across to that young gentleman (Saker by name —Eddy Saker) and nail him for the ball,

This being satisfactorily arranged, Cecil explained to Augustus that an invitation identical with his own in every respect—except that it contained an additional postscript referring to the nails of a certain person — had been placed in the hands of Jones's Boy, who had, without any hesitation, accepted for self and friend.

The explanation was hardly completed when the housemaid entered the scullery, and told Augustus that cook wanted him to run down to Susan Wace's, and to bring her back with him as sharp as possible. Susan was engaged to help the kitchen-maid, and ought to have been up two hours ago. As soon as ever he returned, he was to clean himself and attend to the door.

The Fates were gracious to the Pickles today. This edict of the cook's removed two of their chief difficulties: first, the difficulty of conveying their invitation to Master Eddy Saker; and secondly, the difficulty of smuggling into the nursery the provisions which they had ordered.

At about two o'clock, when Mrs. Wolly had just cleared away the nursery dinner, and had again retired to her labours in the kitchen, the Pickles heard an unwonted thumping up the back-stairs, and, on running out to learn the cause, beheld Augustus dragging painfully from step to step an enormous grocer's-basket.

'Hurrah!' they cried in a breath; 'the things are come!'

'You never felt nothink like the weight on it,' said Augustus, blowing like a walrus. 'Give us a 'and, Master Cecil; I'm fair beat.'

Cecil and Belle both gave a hand, and at last, with many a grievous bump, Mr. Toppin's consignment of goods was dragged to a resting-place on the landing, and thence to a more permanent abode under Cecil's bed.

Augustus would fain have lingered to see the basket unpacked, but against such anticipation of the delights of the evening the Pickles strongly protested. Possibly, however, protests would have been of no avail, had not a loud ring at the front-door bell reminded Augustus that

there were other reasons against his staying, besides his hosts' objections.

As soon as the unpacking began, the Pickles discovered a good many parcels of strange and unaccountable shape and feel. Gritty packets, squashy packets, rustling packets, crackling packets, hard round packets, hard oblong packets, hard pyramidal packets, indefinite, indescribable packets.

When the last item had been taken out of the basket, the floor of Cecil's bedroom was so effectually bestrewn that the children could hardly stir hand or foot without upsetting something or other with a bump, or a squab, or a rattle. One misfortune of a more serious character had already befallen Cecil. Hopping about from package to package, he contrived to send his toe right through a certain paper bag; and, on picking it up to assure himself that no harm was done, there swished through the hole a snow-white torrent that nothing could hold back. In less than no time Cecil's knickerbockers were like a miller's breeks, and the carpet was an inch deep in dust.

'Why, it's ground rice!' said Cecil, licking a little of the powder from his fingers.

Belle, too, nearly came to grief in one particular. Incautiously reversing a certain bowl-shaped package, swathed with much care and many bandages, she became aware of a soft ooze that threatened to glue her fingers to the paper. By quickly turning the bowl right-side up again, she averted a worse calamity than that which had befallen Cecil. Golden syrup, however admirable in a suet pudding, is decidedly objectionable upon a carpet.

Having mopped up with a sponge and a wet towel as much as they could of Cecil's libation, and the slight golden sprinkling that had fallen upon Belle's dress, the Pickles set to work to count the packages. There were forty-three altogether.

Thrust through the string of one parcel—a triangular parcel with a pronounced smell ('Cheese,' said Cecil, sniffing)—they discovered a letter, addressed in a fine, flourishing hand, to Miss Parker. This letter, on being opened, was found to contain two enclosures:—

(No. 1.)

'*Madam*,—

Herewith I beg to enclose goods as per esteemed order. I have taken the liberty to add a few little articles, calculated to promote harmony and mutual esteem on this auspicious and festive Occasion. Venturing cordially to wish you and your esteemed circle the Compliments of the Season,

'*I remain, Madam,*

'*Yours most Respectfly.*

'*J. W.* TOPPIN.'

(No. 2.) '9 *Baldwin Street, Copplestoke, December* 26, 187–.

'MISS PARKER

To J. W. TOPPIN, *General Dealer.*

CHOICE TOBACCOS AND CIGARS. LEMONADE AND GINGER BEER OF BEST QUALITY. ALL SORTS OF TOYS AND FANCY STATIONERY. A LARGE ASSORTMENT OF BRUSHES. BLACK LEAD. KITES. PURE GROCERIES. AGENT FOR THE ROTUNDA SEWING MACHINE.

	s.	*d.*
15 *lbs. Cumberland ham* @ 1*s.* 1*d.* .	16	3
3 *tins lobster* @ 9*d.*	2	3
1 *doz. tea-cakes*	1	0
½ *doz. lemons*	0	6
3 *lbs. fine Congou Tea* @ 2*s.* 6*d.*. .	7	6

	s.	d.
5 *lbs. best American Cheese @ 9d.* .	3	9
2 *tins Hare Soup @ 1s.* . . .	2	0
2 *lbs. Best Lump Sugar @ 4½d.* . .	0	9
¼ *do. Candied Peel @ 8d.* . . .	0	2
4 *loaves @ 6½d.*	2	2
2 *lbs. Best Dorset Butter @ 1s. 4d.* .	2	8
1½ *doz. fresh Irish eggs @ 1s. 3d.* .	1	10½
1 *Marmalade*	0	8
1 *Strawberry Jam*	0	9
1 *doz. assorted ginger beer and Lemonade*	1	0
1 *Australian mutton*	1	3
½ *doz. matches @ 8d.*	0	4
2 *pkts. best Composites @ 1s. 10d.* .	3	8
2 *lbs. Golden Syrup @ 5d.* . . .	0	10
1 *do. Ginger nuts*	0	9
1 *do. Best Mix'd Biscuits* . . .	1	0
½ *do Everton Toffee @ 1s. 2d.* . .	0	7
1 *do. Ground Rice*	0	3½
1 *pkt. Corn Flour*	0	7
1 *doz. Christmas Cards (assorted)* .	2	0
2 *lbs. Currants*	1	0
1½ *doz. real Havana cigars, 7 for 1s.* .	2	6
1 *box Sardines*	1	0
¼ *lb. nutmeg @ 5s.*	1	3
	£3	0 4

'Now that,' cried Belle, 'is what I call

really kind and considerate. He's forgotten nothing—absolutely nothing!'

'Yes,' assented Cecil; 'and he's put in just the right quantity of everything.'

'And the letter, too—"Venturing cordially to wish to you and your esteemed circle the Compliments of the Season"—how beautifully he expresses himself! I shall certainly keep that letter.'

'But, I say, Belle! three pounds and fourpence!—it's an awful lot, isn't it? Where's the money to come from, I wonder?'

'Out of the Bank, I suppose; but we can think about that another time. As we *are* going to entertain company, I'm sure Mamma would like us to do it well.'

'Well, we *have* done it well—there's no mistake about that!'

CHAPTER VII.

THE PICKLES RECEIVE COMPANY.

By seven o'clock the preparations for the banquet were nearly complete. All the unnecessary provisions—among which the children had been reluctantly compelled to include those attractive tins of Mr. Toppin's, since their best efforts to open them had been quite unavailing—had been bundled away under Cecil's bed. Belle's blue-and-gold tea service—permission to use which had been obtained from Mrs. Parker early in the day—appropriately made under these brilliant circumstances its first appearance upon any table-cloth. A little before six o'clock Mrs. Wolly had made for the children their ordinary tea, and cut their ordinary bread-and-butter. Then, being in a great hurry to return to her pressing duties below, she had told Belle

to pour the tea, when it had stood long enough, into her little teapot. The kettle she had left upon the hob. Then, saying that they must not mind about the things being cleared away till dinner was over, Mrs. Wolly, in the comfortable belief that she left the Pickles in an unusually harmless and contented frame of mind, had retired to her avocations. The moment the good lady's back was turned the children had brought in, from their lurking-place beneath Cecil's bed, ham, jam, butter, tea-cakes, and all the luxuries which they had so lavishly provided. This was an hour ago, and now, at seven o'clock, Belle was giving the final touches to the arrangement of the table. Enormous hunches of bread-and-butter, of brusque but eminently hospitable appearance, were piled up at one end of the board. Opposite to this homely yet necessary dish, and hewn into huge wedge-shaped slices, stood a soda-cake, provided by Mrs. Parker as a treat for the Pickles. In the middle of the table, and decorated with a becoming pink frill, was placed the great attraction of the banquet—the ham. Round

this imposing central figure were grouped marmalade, jam, biscuits, and ginger-nuts—the two former, plates and dishes having run short, in their pots, the two latter in their bags.

The general appearance of the room had received proper attention, all irrelevant toys, relics of 'cutting-out,' and litter of every kind, having been hidden under the sofa. Two new pictures from a recent number of the *Graphic* had been pinned upon the wall, and opposite the door by which the guests were expected to enter was hung a scroll, bearing, in Belle's largest and most ornamental print, the appropriate words,—

'WELCOME AGUSTUS.'
'WELCOME JONES'S BOY.'

'It's all very nice,' said Belle, surveying the general effect of their arrangements; 'very nice, indeed. Nothing could be better. And now I'll make tea.'

At a minute or two past seven the sound of a carriage stopping below, followed by a ring at the bell, announced to the Pickles the arrival of

Mrs. Parker's first guests. This ring was followed, at short intervals, by several others. By a quarter-past seven, the time fixed for the commencement of their own entertainment, the children judged that their mother's party must be nearly complete.

Belle had only just had time to say to her brother, 'They ought to be coming now,' when heavy boots were heard blundering up the back-stairs, and immediately afterwards Augustus and his friend entered.

Augustus was beautifully washed, and his hair, as he gallantly ducked his head to Belle, shed around him a luxurious perfume. Indeed he had bought and rubbed in, specially for this occasion, the entire contents of a twopenny jar of pomatum. A spotted handkerchief, also fragrant with pomatum, drooped gracefully from his breast-pocket. He had a clean paper collar—a little burst at the button-hole—and a green-and-orange tie. His boots had been polished with an entire disregard of expense—the blacking being Dr. Parker's—and shone superbly.

'This is Master Saker, Miss Belle—Master Edward Saker,' said Augustus, leading forward his young friend.

'I'm very glad to see you, Master Saker,' Belle replied. 'I hope you'll enjoy yourself, and eat as much as ever you can. You look a very nice boy.'

Master Saker blushed very much, and shifted his legs, and turned his cap round and round, and fixed his eyes on the carpet, and exhibited every symptom of distressing shyness.

He was quite a little boy—rather under than over Belle's own height—but very sturdily and compactly put together. He had a round, red, good-humoured countenance, a wide mouth, a snub nose, and (when he raised them from the ground) the biggest and bluest eyes surely that ever made a plain face almost beautiful. On the whole, Eddy Saker produced a very pleasant impression. Most people who looked at him would have thought what Belle said, that he was a very nice boy. Master Saker was by no means got up in the same gorgeous style as Augustus. Short as were his legs, they were

too long for his trowsers. His jacket had been patched till further patching was impossible. Both his boots were very much 'out' at the sides. Instead of an elegant and striking collar and tie, such as his friend sported, he wore round his neck a shabby woollen comforter.

Augustus' first words, after the ceremony of introduction had been performed, and he and his friend had been relieved by Cecil of their caps, were addressed in a loud whisper to Eddy Saker, and were as follows: 'Oh my, Eddy! ain't it a whopper?'

Eddy blushed, glanced furtively in the direction of the ham, and whispered back, 'It *am*—just.'

Belle, during the awkward interval of waiting for the arrival of the remaining guests, made several efforts to promote conversation. Her success, however, was very indifferent. From Eddy Saker she extracted nothing but blushes, and Augustus' eyes were fixed upon the ham in contemplation so rapt that he seemed hardly to hear what was said to him.

At the end of a painful period of ten minutes

clumsy boots trying to tread lightly were heard upon the stairs. Then there came a rap at the door, followed by the apparition of a red head.

'If you please, Master Cecil,' said Jones's Boy, 'could I speak to you on the landing, private and confidential, for half a minute?'

'Where's your friend, Jones's Boy?' inquired Belle.

'He's all right, Miss; he's a-waiting downstairs, and he can't come up till I've spoke to Master Cecil.'

Cecil withdrew with Jones's Boy. When the door was closed behind them, the visitor began: 'I say, old chap, just let Hawlbut 'Arris wash his face and hands afore he shows up, will you? You see, he's a chimbley-sweep by perfession, and he was detained on business, so he hadn't time to clean hisself afore coming to the party, and he ain't quite the thing—not for ladies, you know—with the soot on him.'

Cecil, glancing down the stairs, saw a black face, with gleaming white teeth grinning up at him.

'Is he a real sweep?' asked Cecil.

'Well, I'm a pretty good imitation, if I ain't,' said the young nigger below. ''Weep-o! 'weep-o! 'weep-o!'

'Shut up, Hawlbut!' cried Jones's Boy, with many impatient gesticulations; 'shut up, you hignorant hignoramus! can't you? D'ye want to fetch the 'ole 'ouse down upon us? I wouldn't have brought you to a select gathering, if I'd knowed your manners was as bad as this.'

'Thanks, Sam. Much obliged for your 'ighly instructive remarks. I'll make a note on 'em as soon as ever I get 'ome.'

'A real sweep!' exclaimed Cecil, when he was able at length to get in a word; 'a real sweep! Oh, that *is* grand! You mustn't wash yourself on any account. We've been wanting all our lives to know a sweep. Belle will be no end delighted.' So saying, he rushed downstairs at the imminent peril of his neck, and gripping Master Albert Harris's sooty wrist, half dragged, half led, that coy and protesting youth into his sister's presence.

Belle stood staring open-mouthed for two or

three seconds; then, darting forward, she wrung Master Harris's hand with all her might, and cried enthusiastically, 'Oh, how very kind of you to dress up on purpose! You look beautiful! How cleverly you've done it! I never saw——'

'He's real, Belle,' Cecil explained, rapturously. 'He's quite real; he isn't the least bit imitation.'

'How very charming! how delightful! It's almost like a dream! But tea has been ready a long time. You must give me your arm, and Augustus must carve the ham; Cecil, at the other end of the table, opposite me; Jones's Boy, at my left hand. Now we're all right.'

The young sweep, grinning to the very limits of possibility, and, no doubt, blushing invisibly beneath his sooty coat of mail, had hardly escorted Belle to her place, and dropped into his own chair, when he bounced up again in evident consternation.

'If you please, Miss,' he said to Belle, 'I must have summat to sit on—a piece of old sacking, or a newspaper, or summat; and I

must have a towel round my neck. I'm a-blacking everythink.'

Belle politely assured the guest that they didn't object in the very least to the chairs and table-cloth being blackened—that, in fact, they preferred it; but the Black Prince positively refused to resume his seat until he was rendered comparatively harmless by the precautions which he had suggested. At length he was provided with both newspaper and towel, and the business of tea began.

The tea-cake having been handed round, and each of the guests having taken a wedge of it, no further progress was made for some time. It was in vain that Belle begged them not to wait. The four young gentlemen sat staring at their plates, and no persuasion could induce any of them to begin eating. Evidently it was a point of etiquette with all of them to prove that they could have held out without food a good deal longer. At last, when Belle and Cecil had each eaten two slices of tea-cake, the hostess said,—

'If none of you will be the first to begin,

suppose you all start together when I give the word. Now, then! One, two, three, and away!'

This plan proved effectual, and the ball, once set a-rolling, trundled on merrily enough. Each of the guests helped his neighbour with great assiduity, and it was amazing to watch the demolition of piles of bread-and-butter, plum-cake, and tea-cake. A moment ago there towered a lofty plummy pinnacle; now only a few scattered crumbs and currants told of the fabric that had been. How four small human beings could stow away among them such masses of food, and yet retain their original size, was a conundrum which neither Belle nor Cecil could answer.

Conversation there was none, in spite of the hostess's efforts in that direction. The guests evidently felt that it was impossible to eat and talk at the same time, and that to eat was their duty just now.

The onslaught on the tea-cake had been so suddenly begun, and so briskly sustained, that for some minutes an opportunity of introducing the ham had hardly occurred. At length,

taking advantage of a momentary lull in the gobbling and guzzling (the tea-cups had been circulating gaily all the while), Belle called upon Augustus to do his work. That young gentleman, who, though glad to pay all due civilities to cake and bread-and-butter, had never wavered in his allegiance to his first love, the ham, waited for no second bidding. At the word of command he whipped his knife out of his pocket, and drove it deep into the thickest part of the mass before him.

Now it happened that Cecil had seen Augustus, early in the day, digging for worms with that knife. This circumstance, he felt, disqualified it in a manner from operating on the ham. He therefore whispered to Augustus, 'Take another knife; don't use your pocket-knife.'

'Oh, never mind about the knife,' Augustus cheerfully replied; 'it does all sorts of rough work, you know. I calls it my frog-sticker.'

'It's not for the sake of the knife I mind, Augustus,' Cecil was obliged to explain; 'it's for the sake of the ham, you know. Remember

what I saw you doing with the knife this morning.'

'Digging worms, you mean? Oh, you'll never taste 'em. The knife's been in the blacking and lots of things since then.' And Augustus took a fork, and proceeded to hew a block out of the ham.

'Why,' he said, inspecting the lump upon his fork, 'why, it's raw! It ain't never been cooked at all!'

'No,' exclaimed the Pickles together. 'Ought ham to be cooked?'

'Well, yes, as a general rule it ought.'

'Oh, dear!' said Belle, 'how very unfortunate! Of course I knew that *fried* ham was cooked, but I always thought that *boiled* ham was eaten raw.'

'Well, we'll eat this 'un raw, anyhow. Take this here piece, Eddy, and pass your plate to me. Any for you, Miss Belle? Just a small piece now.'

Belle, however, declined even a small piece, and so did Cecil, but Augustus had no other refusals, and Eddy Saker pronounced the ham 'prime,' and Jones's Boy said it was 'lovely.'

Well, raw ham—as those of my readers who have been 'up the Rhine' are well aware—is a very favourite dish in Germany. Eddy Saker could have produced in support of his opinion the evidence of plenty of Serene Highnesses and other illustrious people.

'There are eggs in the other room,' said Cecil, when everybody had wrought his worst upon the ham. 'There's lots of eggs, only we've got no egg-cups.'

'Could you heat a hegg, Hawlbut?' inquired Jones's Boy. 'Don't say no if you could now. You could eat it in your hand very handy, you know.'

Albert couldn't say what he could do. He thought, perhaps, he might manage an egg if Eddy Saker was good for one, too. Eddy was willing to do his best if Augustus would keep him in countenance. Augustus was always ready to oblige a friend—provided he was backed up by Jones's Boy. Jones's Boy wouldn't stand out if all the rest were agreed.

Hence it came about that eggs round were introduced, and that Eddy Saker boiled them

(three minutes and a half precisely by Jones's Boy's counting) in Mrs. Wolly's tea-kettle, and that Belle and Cecil, eating theirs in their fingers, in imitation of the rest, declared that egg-cups were a weak and wicked invention, and that if you wanted really to taste the flavour of an egg you *must* hold the egg in your fingers.

As soon as ever the tea-things were cleared away—the service being safely locked up in Belle's drawers, and the fragments of the feast, ham, butter, jam, and all, being hid in Cecil's bed—the fun began. The shyness of the guests had by this time worn off considerably. Eddy Saker, the most bashful of the party, became quite chatty. Jones's Boy was positively festive. 'Puss in the Corner' was the first game they tried. When they were tired of that, they had a quarter of an hour at 'Blind Man's Buff.' Both these games were played with as little noise as possible, for fear of awakening suspicion.

The only disturbance of the harmony of the evening was a little dispute between Jones's

Boy and Albert Harris as to the tightness of the former's bandage in the game of 'Blind Man's Buff.' Master Harris asserted that Jones's Boy could see under the handkerchief, and had succeeded in catching him only by help of illicit glimpses. Jones's Boy called Master Harris 'a stuck-up little monkey.' Master Harris said Jones's Boy was another. Jones's Boy affirmed that he could, under no circumstances, submit to Master Harris's cheek, and desired to know if that young gentleman could fight. Master Harris replied that he could, and would; and, in proof of his ability and readiness to do so, threw off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves, and requested Jones's Boy to come on. Jones's Boy was somewhat tardy in coming on. His sleeves took a great deal of rolling up, and his jacket had to be folded with extreme precision. During these preparations it was noticed that his complexion became very pale and pasty. He explained, however, that he always looked like that when he was very fierce and determined. Cecil even went so far as to affirm subsequently that the young hero's hair lost something of

the brightness of its scarlet, but in that assertion I think Cecil's imagination came into play. Augustus, immediately on the difficulty having arisen, had volunteered his services as second on behalf of Jones's Boy, while Eddy Saker had offered his knee to Albert Harris. Cecil now, with considerate kindness, ran into his bedroom, and impartially placed his bath-sponge (the same that had outraged poor Mrs. Wolly's ear) at the disposal of both combatants. Augustus, as a final convenience, inquired if there was a bit of beefsteak anywhere handy. This, however, not being readily procurable, Cecil fetched the ham out of his bed, saying that he hoped that that might do as well, and that he didn't mind if they used the lot.

'Now then,' cried Augustus, pushing his man forward, 'go in, old chap, and finish him off genteel and pretty.'

Whereupon Jones's Boy grinned desperately, shut his eyes, whirled his arms wildly round and round, backed into a corner, and asked Master Harris if he had had enough, or whether he wanted another dose. Master Harris scorned

to return any answer, and, dancing about his antagonist with great lightness and agility, would, beyond all doubt, in a very few seconds have caused important modifications in Jones's Boy's features, had not Belle at this point interfered. Hitherto, I am sorry to say, she had been entering with the keenest zest into the spirit of the combat. The preliminaries had seemed to her quite delightful. But when she saw one of the combatants really in danger of being hurt, her tender heart cried out against the brutality, and, throwing herself between the young sweep and the object of his wrath, she implored both the boys, for her sake, to shake hands and be friends.

Jones's Boy was most obliging in the matter. He assured Belle that there was nothing he wouldn't do to give her the smallest satisfaction; that from that moment Master Harris was as safe as though he were snugly tucked up in his own bed. That young person was not quite so ready to keep the peace; but, after a little persuasion, he held out his hand to Jones's Boy, and said that if Jones's Boy was

satisfied, he was satisfied. Jones's Boy grasped the outstretched hand, and declared with tearful fervour that he was more than satisfied, and that if there was a party in the wide world whom he loved and honoured it was Hawlbut 'Arris. Albert replied that his sentiments towards Jones's Boy were identical with Jones's Boy's sentiments towards him. And so the impending storm passed over, and the sun came out again.

'And now,' said Belle, 'now that we are all once more pleasant and friendly, let us have some ginger-beer, and drink one another's very good health.'

The proposition was received with enthusiasm, and lemonade and ginger-beer being then and there introduced (cold weather, wasn't it, for that kind of beverage?), everybody drank a full bottle of the sparkling tipple, and everybody else's health. After that, on the motion of Eddy Saker, the party joined hands, and sang 'Auld lang syne' with great gusto and good-fellowship.

By this time all the precautions at first

adopted against making too much noise had been quite forgotten. Everybody gave his lungs and all the rest of him unrestrained play, and the nursery echoed with a royal din. Master Harris, declining, even at Belle's request, to go up the chimney (there was a cheerful fire burning all the time), atoned to the company as far as possible for this refusal by giving his 'Weep-o! 'weep-o! 'weep-o!' in his very best style. Then Eddy Saker, not a bit shy now, sang with great spirit 'The Three Little Pigs,' the whole company joining in the chorus. After that, at Augustus' request, Jones's Boy danced an Irish jig.

While witnessing this performance, a brilliant idea occurred to Belle. They would have a regular dance. She and Cecil danced capitally. Jones's Boy had proved his agility. No doubt the others could manage a polka somehow or other.

'Come,' she cried, as soon as Jones's Boy came to a standstill, 'we'll all dance now. We'll have a polka. Master Harris, you are to be my partner; it doesn't matter about not

knowing how to dance. It's as easy as possible —you'll learn in a minute. Cecil, you dance with Eddy Saker — gentleman, you know. Jones's Boy, you take Augustus.'

Albert Harris having first, in order to protect his partner's dress, readjusted round his neck the towel which he had worn at tea, resigned himself to Belle's guidance, and away the couple whirled. The other pairs quickly followed suit. Belle, as we said, was an admirable dancer, and the young sweep, being exceedingly nimble and light on his toes, soon fell into her step, and polked as well as could be desired. Cecil and Eddy Saker managed pretty decently. Jones's Boy, however, could do nothing with Augustus. That couple soon dissolved partnership, and stood looking at the rest.

'Give us some music, as you won't dance,' said Belle, whirling by.

'There's a comb under the sofa,' Cecil added: 'a comb and a piece of thin paper makes capital music.'

Augustus fetched the apparatus, and there

and then blew a thrilling strain. Jones's Boy, unable to devise any other species of melody, seized the poker and the shovel and clanged and clashed with all his might.

'The band is capital!' Belle said, by-and-by. 'We only want a little more light to make it quite perfect. Two candles are not enough. We've got two packets of best composites, only there are no candlesticks to put them in.'

'Leave that to me and Jones's Boy,' said Augustus. 'We'll soon rig up summat or other.'

They hauled out the six empty ginger-beer bottles, stuck a candle in each, and propped the bottles up anyhow they could.

'How's that?' asked Augustus, when he had lighted all the candles.

'Better,' said Belle, 'but not quite right yet. I want a regular illumination.'

'Then we must draw some more corks.'

'Do, by all means; draw the whole lot.'

Fiz—pop! pop—fiz! fiz—pop! Six more corks were drawn, and the contents of six more bottles drunk; then six more candles were placed in the empty receptacles and lighted on the spot.

'That'll do,' said Belle. 'Now then, Master Harris, for a regular good dance. Play up, band!'

Clash went the fire-irons! Snort went the comb! Round went the dancers! It was a lively scene, I promise you.

While the fun was at its highest and wildest the door opened, and Mrs. Parker and two other ladies stood in silent astonishment, surveying the prospect.

'Come and see my little Pickles in bed,' Mrs. Parker had said: 'they look so sweet and innocent in their sleep.'

Two slumbering cherubs were what the ladies had come to see. They saw—well, you know what they saw.

For some few seconds, the noise of the opening door being drowned in the din of the revels, the band played and the dancers whirled, as though nothing had happened. Then Augustus became aware of three pairs of astonished eyes fixed upon himself. Without a word he dropped the clanging instrument and dashed for the further door. Down went the table, and with

it the majority of the lights. The three other guests, hardly knowing what had happened, followed pell-mell in Augustus' track, crashing through the door, clattering down the stairs.

The sound of their clanking boots dwindled and died. In place of the din and flare of a moment ago there was silence and darkness.

Then Belle's accents rose, silvery-clear: 'Oh, Mamma, we've had such a *delightful* party!'

CHAPTER VIII.

GOOD SOUND PORT: AN EXCELLENT FAMILY WINE.

My narrative passes somewhat slightly over the events of the day following the entertainment. To relate at length the sayings and doings of two young people in bed would be rather dull work, wouldn't it? and it was in bed that Belle and Cecil spent the Thursday of Christmas week.

It was in vain that Belle explained that the reception was held as an essay in housekeeping, and that the reason why Cecil and she had not informed their mother of their intention to receive company was, that they wanted to tell her of the entertainment, after it was over, as a delightful surprise.

Mrs. Parker replied that she certainly *had*

been surprised, and, equally certainly, had *not* been delighted; and that she thought Belle would see her action in the matter in a different light after a few hours' calm reflection under the bed-clothes. To bed, accordingly, she doomed the Pickles for the whole of the next day.

The surplus goods were returned to the obliging Mr. Toppin, and the amount of those actually used was defrayed out of the Pickles' deposits in the Savings Bank. Dr. Parker severely reprimanded Augustus for his share in the proceedings, and Cecil was forbidden to hold any further communication with the young gentleman in the boot-room.

Friday was Cecil's birthday. There was some talk of cancelling the customary honours of the day, in view of the enormities recently perpetrated by the Pickles. However, as the quietude of the day before appeared to have had a wholesome effect on both the children, and as Cecil was judged to have been less to blame than his sister in the matter of the party, it was finally decided that none of the glories of his ninth birthday should be docked.

Now, then, for the presents. First of all came something very small and hard, wrapped up in tissue-paper, and inscribed, 'Cecil, on his ninth birthday, with Grandmamma's best love.'

'It's a shilling,' thought Cecil, rather disappointed, as his fingers recognised money. But when he had torn the paper off—fortunate boy! generous grandmamma!—it was no pale-faced shilling that he saw, but a glittering golden sovereign.

That was pretty well for a start, wasn't it?

The next present was not wrapped up at all. Of course it was not; you wouldn't have two white rabbits wrapped up in paper, pink eyes and all, would you? and that is what *this* was. Cecil determined to invest his sovereign in the erection of a gorgeous suite of apartments for the accommodation of these new pets. In the meantime they had to make the best of such conveniences as were afforded by Belle's dolls'-house, the tenants of which were evicted and thrown out upon the charity of the cold world at a moment's notice. Mrs. Wolly was instructed to order, when the greengrocer called, half-a-crown's

worth of the best cabbage-leaves; and Augustus, immediately on his arrival, was sent straight off again to the baker's for a bag of bran. The prettier of the two bunnies was named 'Jack Ketch,' and the plainer, 'Napoleon.' This delightful present was from Aunt Ethel.

After that came a box of tools, containing a mallet, a hammer, two gimlets, a chisel, a brad-awl, a gouge, and the jolliest little saw you ever beheld. There were other things, too, I think, but that is all I can remember. This was Papa's present, and Cecil liked it better than anything he had, though Belle preferred the rabbits.

Then there were two books—*Masterman Ready* from Mamma, and *Froggy's Little Brother* —that delightful story—from Aunt Lydia.

There were lots of nice things besides, but I have only time to tell you about one more. This was a writing-case, the precise copy of Belle's, and most completely furnished. Real good paper and envelopes, you know, and India-rubber, and sealing-wax, and pens, and pen-holders, and an HB pencil.

Now who do you think gave him that?

Why, Belle herself.

Not a bad thing, was it, for our little girl to buy with her own money out of her own money-box? As soon as ever it was settled that Cecil was to keep his birthday, she went to Mrs. Parker and asked leave to buy him a present. Leave was readily given, and so Belle slipped down to Gamble's, and bought that writing-case.

The little attempt on the part of the weather, a couple of days ago, to look like Christmas, had failed miserably. When the children looked out of the window this morning the world had its umbrella up and its coat-collar buttoned under its chin. It was what a Scotchman calls a 'saft' day, and anybody else a soaking day.

No chance for our youngsters to try their acme skates, or even to get a walk. However, with such an array of delightful presents as that lucky Cecil had, there was, of course, no difficulty in spending the morning. The time went only too fast. How they did feed and fondle Jack Ketch and Napoleon! How they did hammer and chisel, and bore and saw, and litter the floor with sawdust and shavings!

One o'clock and dinner came before they knew where they were. I won't enter into particulars about the plum-pudding, because I don't want to make your mouth water; but Belle said it was a 'beauty,' and Cecil said it was a 'stunner;' and they were both right.

While Cecil was finishing, slowly and reluctantly, his last mouthful of that memorable pudding, Mrs. Parker, with her outdoor things on, looked into the nursery.

'Good-bye, little people,' she said. 'I'm sorry I can't stay at home and help to amuse you this wet afternoon. But I've got to inquire about the character of a housemaid; and after that I've got to call on poor Mrs. Baker, who is very ill indeed; and after that I've got ever so much shopping to do. So you must amuse yourselves with your books and toys till five o'clock, and then there is going to be a little treat for you.'

'It's cake,' said Cecil.

'It's jam,' said Belle.

'It's both,' said Mrs. Parker; 'and something besides. Freddy and Annie Vincent are coming to tea.'

'Hurrah!' shouted the children.

'They would have been here to spend the afternoon, but we arranged that, if it continued wet, Mr. Vincent should drop them here at five o'clock, as he happens to be passing in his cab at that time. It's going to be a thoroughly wet afternoon, I'm afraid, so you must not expect your friends till nearly tea-time. But there's the carriage coming round. Good-bye, my dears. Be good children, and amuse yourselves nicely and quietly.'

Mrs. Parker kissed her Pickles, and left the nursery.

The carriage had hardly driven off when Mrs. Wolly came in, carrying on a tray four wine-glasses.

'Look what your ma's left for you,' said Mrs. Wolly. 'It's well to be some folks, I'm sure. The more outrageous they gets, with Augustuses, and Jones's Boys, and nasty low sweeps, the more they'se coddled and petted with presents, and plum-puddings, and goodness knows what besides. They invites a party——'

'Oh, it's mean to bring that up again,' said Belle; 'that was ever so long ago.'

'Yes,' added Cecil. 'Never mind that, there's a good old Wolly. You shall have a drink of my wine. Fire away! Down to the cutting, you know.'

'Ah! but you're not to drink it now, don't think it. You're to keep it till Master Freddy and Miss Annie comes—nice, good, quiet children, with no low tricks nor nasty rumbustious games, as I wish you'd copy, that I do. Your 'ma only poured it out for you in case she shouldn't be back in time.'

Mrs. Wolly set down the tray on a small side-table. The children pressed round her.

'What wine is it?' inquired Belle. 'Is it sherry?'

'Sherry? No, indeed. Who do you suppose is going to give sherry to two little monkeys like you? It's beautiful home-made cowslip wine, and a great deal better than sherry any day, as they puts nobody knows what nastiness into.'

With this expression of opinion, Mrs. Wolly left the nursery.

Mrs. Wolly was quite right. Who that has seen the freckled cowslips, with their heavy drooping bells, yellowing an April meadow, can ever forget their beauty and fragrance? What a rich, faint perfume they give out as they are fermenting in the cask! and how, three months later, the nectar which they have shed their innocent life-blood to yield winks and dimples in the glass! Yes, I have a great respect for cowslip wine.

But sherry ——. Well, I may mention one thing. If any body is troubled with rats, and has found the usual vermin-killers of no avail, let him just leave the cork out of a bottle of his cheap sherry for one night, and in the morning, I think, his troubles will be at an end. The rats need not drink the sherry—we would not inflict unnecessary pain. The odour will be quite enough for them.

'Only cowslip!' exclaimed Belle, as soon as the door had closed behind Mrs. Wolly. 'Well, I do think Mamma might have given us sherry on your birthday.'

'I like cowslip,' said Cecil. 'Sherry's horrid —nasty bitter stuff.'

'You're only a little boy, Cecil, and don't understand these things. Wait till you come to my age—wait till you come to going-in-twelve —and you'll know better.'

Cecil was silenced by this rebuke.

After a little while Belle resumed the subject: 'I wouldn't mind so much for myself—though when one gets to nearly twelve one might expect to have a grown-up glass of wine. What I'm thinking about is this—what will Annie Vincent say?'

'Why, she'll say it's real good stuff. She doesn't have wine on her birthday, I dare say.'

'That's all you know about it. Why, she has half a glass of port nearly every day at dessert. She's a person that knows a good glass of wine, I can tell you.'

'Half a glass of port nearly every day!' echoed Cecil, in an awe-stricken whisper.

'She has it because she's got a cough, and sometimes she has something the matter with her throat.'

'Why, when I had a sore throat, I only got liquorice and a gargle, and the gargle wasn't

nice a bit. It tasted like ——' Cecil stopped short. 'Oh, Belle, you're not going to drink your wine yet?'

'Of course I'm not. I'm only tasting it. I'll tell you what, Cecil; we'll doctor this up a bit, and make it into port.'

'Make it into port! Do you know how, Belle?'

There were, in Cecil's opinion, very few things which his sister did *not* know how to do.

'Let me think a bit.' Belle clasped her hands behind her back, and paced slowly to and fro, absorbed in meditation. Cecil kept at her side, with his hands thrust deep down into his knickerbocker pockets. He blessed his stars that, though sadly inferior to his sister in age, and hardly less, he felt, in intellectual resource, one distinct advantage still rested with him: he had pockets—five in his ordinary costume, and eight when he had his Ulster on. He jingled his pennies, and was contented with his lot.

After a few solemn turns Belle stopped and took a little sip at the wine, rolling it about in

her mouth, and smacking her lips like the cork coming out of a bottle of pop. Cecil did the same, happy to feel that, although his judgment might not be so decisive as Belle's, his smack was, if anything, louder.

With pursed lips and a puzzled frown upon her brow, Belle resumed her perambulation.

Not a ray of light had broken in upon her yet. At length, with startling suddenness, a brilliant idea flashed across Cecil's mind—the most splendid idea possible.

'I know what it wants—I know what it wants,' he cried, clapping his hands and breaking into his dance of triumph, 'it's blacking.'

'Well done!' said Belle, 'well done, indeed! You're coming out on your ninth birthday; how strange that it never occurred to me,—of course it's blacking.'

Without another word, Cecil clattered downstairs as hard as he could go. The last seven steps he took at a sprawling leap. Belle followed and wound up with a jump of five steps—good, for a girl, as Cecil admitted.

The scullery was their destination. (Oh,

my Pickles, my Pickles, have you forgotten so soon the prohibition against visits paid to Augustus?) There they found, not the presiding genius of that region of blackbeetles and crickets—he was carrying out pill-boxes, and bottles with neat labels and charming little leather caps—but the whole of his extensive stock in trade: two hard brushes, a tin of Day and Martin's blacking, and a saucer containing a little of the inky fluid ready for use.

Cecil seized the brushes and the tin, and Belle the saucer. In precisely the third of a jiffy they had banged the nursery-door behind them.

Belle began to pour the blacking, very cautiously, into one of the wine-glasses. At first it wouldn't come at all, and then it came with a run. (I have suffered a good deal in the same way myself from the obstinacy of anchovy-sauce.) However, she succeeded in getting about as much as she thought necessary into each of the glasses, and rather more than was necessary over the table-cloth.

'Now,' said Belle, 'it's your birthday, you have the first drink.'

Cecil made a long chirrup, and took rather a small sip. He didn't feel so grateful as he ought to have felt for the privileges of the day. To tell the truth, he never got that sip down at all. He was obliged to make a run for the grate.

'Queer,' said Belle, taking a very tiny sip on her own account; 'it isn't right yet.'

'I think it wants marmalade,' said Cecil, his brain stimulated to great activity by the flattering reception of his first suggestion.

'Really, how you are coming out,' said Belle. 'You'll be a great man yet, Cecil. Marmalade it is.'

They made a second rush into the lower regions. In the passage, at the foot of the back-stairs, was the closet in which Mrs. Parker kept her groceries. Cecil tried the door. It was open. He fetched one of the hall-chairs, and, mounting upon it, began to explore.

The first thing he came to was a box of night-lights. He handed them down to Belle.

'Take hold,' he said, 'they'll come in useful.'

Then he found a bottle of salad-dressing.

'Hand it down,' said Belle, 'the wine wants

mellowness, and that is just the thing to set it right.'

Then came a packet of corn-flour, then a box of matches, then an opened paper of raisins, then a box of sardines, also opened, then chicory, then cayenne pepper, candied peel, and soft sugar; last of all, the marmalade, in search of which they had come. All of these, one by one, were submitted to and approved by Belle. That young lady's apron afforded a convenient receptacle for the majority of these miscellaneous stores. Cecil hugged the remainder to his chest, and followed his sister upstairs in stately procession. Every third step or so something slipped from him and went bumping downwards. At last, however, they got the whole collection safely stowed away in their den, and business began in earnest.

The first ingredient added to the brew was, of course, the marmalade. They ladled it out with the lid of the soap-dish. But this was not a convenient spoon, and, while only a small quantity of marmalade was conveyed into the glasses, a very handsome supply was spread

over the table-cloth and dropped upon the carpet.

Now came a little more tasting. 'It's not *quite* the thing yet,' said Belle, smacking her lips with solemn deliberation.

'No, it really is *not* just the cheese,' assented Cecil, whose mouth was as black as a nigger's, or as Albert Harris's, while his jacket was plastered with a thick coating of marmalade.

'We want more room. Fetch the washing-basin, Cecil.'

Cecil brought it, and the wine—now batter-pudding in consistency, and greasy-black with yellowish streaks in colour—was promptly poured into it.

Now began brewing on a really liberal scale. First the sardines were flopped in. They floated —'just like silver fish,' Belle said. Then the matches, broken into chips of convenient size, were added. Then chicory, cayenne, salad-dressing, candied peel, corn-flour, raisins, and sugar. To crown the whole, three night-lights were dropped in, with three loud splashes.

By this time the Pickles were standing in a

him a liberal share of raisins and matches, and carefully steering in a sardine, and another, not quite so full, for herself.

'Many happy returns of the day, dear Cecil, and may you grow up wiser and better every year.'

Belle took a sip.

'Oh, it's capital now!' she said, with a quiver in her left eyelid.

'Yes, capital; and the same to you, Belle, and many of them.'

Cecil's voice was very gulpy, and the greenness deepened.

After that they took sip for sip, with perfect impartiality. At last Belle's glass was drained, and her sardine left high and dry. Cecil's glass had a tiny sip still left in it.

'Finish it up,' said Belle, a little indistinctly, 'and have another.'

'No more, thanks,' replied Cecil; 'it's rather strong, I think. I——don't—feel—very——'

'Don't you? Oh, nonsense! it won't hurt you,' said Belle, with a desperate effort to bear up. Then, after a very brief interval, 'No more do I.'

Meanwhile Cecil, green as grass, was stag-

thick slush of a varying tint—here dirty white, there dirty yellow, there dirty brown, but of an unvarying stickiness. Cecil lost a shoe in it.

There had been a good deal of sipping going on through the different stages of the vintage. An attentive observer might have remarked that Cecil's complexion (Belle, you see, in honour of his birthday, made him take rather more than his fair share) had been varying with these stages. While the wine remained cowslip-wine pure and simple, his cheeks were the loveliest pink and white imaginable. At the blacking stage of the manufacture the pink had lost something of its brilliancy. At the marmalade stage, the pink had wholly disappeared. Then the white got a shade of yellow in it. Yellow was the prevailing tint for some time, but this gradually gave way to a delicate green. Belle's complexion had not undergone these chameleon changes, but it was now very white—where it was not very black.

'Now,' said Belle, when the night-lights were fairly launched, 'now, I think, it will about do;' and she poured out a full glass for Cecil, giving

him a liberal share of raisins and matches, and carefully steering in a sardine, and another, not quite so full, for herself.

'Many happy returns of the day, dear Cecil, and may you grow up wiser and better every year.'

Belle took a sip.

'Oh, it's capital now!' she said, with a quiver in her left eyelid.

'Yes, capital; and the same to you, Belle, and many of them.'

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Meanwhile Cecil, green as grass, was stag-

gering to the bedroom-door. There was a heavy sea running, and the nursery lurched abominably. Belle followed, holding on to anything that came handy. They reeled through the door, Belle retaining just sufficient presence of mind to bang it after them. We will not attempt to open it.

At five o'clock, punctual to the minute, Mr. Vincent's carriage stopped at Dr. Parker's door. Before the youngsters had time to alight, Mrs. Wolly stepped out to speak to their father.

'If you please, sir,' she said, 'the mistress is extremely sorry, but Miss Belle and Master 'Enery Cecil are very ill indeed. They're in their beds, and mistress can't leave them.'

'You don't say so! Then my little folks must pay their visit another day. Why, what's the matter with them, Mrs. Wolly? Had too many good things, I suppose?'

'Well, sir,' replied Mrs. Wolly, cautiously, 'I'm afeard they has taken something as has disagreed with them.'

On this occasion our Pickles had punished

themselves so severely by drinking their own horrible concoction that Mrs. Parker did not think it necessary to inflict on them any other punishment. They were both extremely penitent, and promised that they would never again, as long as they lived, attempt to turn cowslip wine into port.

'No, my Pickles,' said Mrs. Parker, kissing Cecil's poor, pale face, 'I don't think you will.'

CHAPTER IX.

A LILAC COTTON AND A PAIR OF CORDUROYS.

AT about half-past two in the afternoon of the day following the painful experiences recorded in the last chapter, the Pickles—still, perhaps, a trifle pale, but not seriously the worse for wear—were seated at a little table in front of the window, playing a quiet game at 'Birds, beasts, and fishes.' They had spent the day in a thoroughly orderly and edifying fashion. Belle had read aloud to Cecil three chapters of *Froggy's Little Brother*, and, after that, had helped *her* little brother in the production of a letter of thanks to their grandmamma. Then a little time had been given to feeding Jack Ketch and Napoleon—the rabbits had already removed to a commodious hutch in the yard—and the remainder of the afternoon had been

occupied with that game of 'Birds, beasts, and fishes' on which they were now engaged. Mrs. Wolly was delighted with the entire programme, and was even beginning, in spite of their many previous backslidings, to regard the Pickles as reformed characters.

Now, however, Cecil was getting a little tired of the game. Belle was nineteen to his five, and had just set him another regular sticker. It was 'hippopotamus' (Belle spelt it with one *p*), and he couldn't make head or tail of it. He was swinging his legs, and yawning desperately.

At this point Mrs. Wolly entered the nursery, with a large brown-paper parcel in her arms.

'There's a fine armful of fine things,' she said, depositing her burden on the floor of a closet which occupied one of the upper corners of the room.

'What are they?' inquired Cecil, glad of an excuse for a break in his meditations.

'They're clothes, Master Cecil—beautiful clothes, as your kind mamma's going to give away to poor folkses' children. Susan Wace's

little sister is to get a frock and a hat. That good-for-nothing Augustus, as deserves a good whipping instead, is going to have a comforter and a pair of socks; and there's jackets and trowsers for Mrs. Gibbs's two youngest. They're to be given away on New Year's Day. I'll leave 'em here for a little while, and don't you meddle with 'em, mind. I've got to lengthen the skirt of Jane Wace's frock, and I shall come in for it by-and-by.' With this caution Mrs. Wolly withdrew.

'I give it up,' said Cecil.

'Hippopotamus. That makes me twenty.' Belle added one more to the long score in the corner of her slate.

'Stop a bit. You said "beast." Isn't a hippo-what-d'ye-call-it a bird?'

'Nonsense! He's a great, big, big beast.'

'Oh, yes, I remember. I was thinking of albatross.'

They renewed the game, but in a quarter of an hour Cecil had got so hopelessly stupid that he spelt 'whale' *wail*, at which point Belle threw down her pencil in great indignation, and

declined to have any further dealings with him. Cecil, not sorry to be so renounced, got up, and, after wandering about aimlessly for a few minutes, found his way to the closet and the bundle. Forgetful of Mrs. Wolly's injunction, he began pulling over the clothes. Then he tried on the jacket which was intended for one of the young Gibbses, and afterwards, pleased with the novelty of the first investiture, proceeded to don, over his knickerbockers, a pair of corduroy trowsers.

Belle, watching in stately disdain her brother's movements, was soon seized with the infection of dressing-up, and jumping out of her corner, and, laying aside her dignity, proceeded to array herself in the feminine charity-garments.

The gown that was too short for Jane Wace fitted Belle to a T. It was a lilac cotton of the familiar maid-of-all-work type. Round her shoulders she wrapped a little plaid shawl. On her sunny curls she set a brown straw hat, with a brown ribbon straight round the crown.

She looked the queerest little figure possible

—very neat, very respectable, but very, very poor. She clasped her hands in front of her in a prim little way, dropped a low curtsey to Cecil, and said, imitating Susan Wace,—

'If you please, mum, I've called about the place. I can wash, and get up things very nice, and make myself generally useful; and I haven't no objection to children.'

Cecil had by this time, by the aid of Augustus's comforter and a 'pudding-bag' cap, completed his toilet.

'What sort of a street-boy do I make, Belle?' he asked. 'Don't you think I'm rather too clean and new?'

'Well, yes,' Belle replied, after a critical survey of her brother from several points of view. 'You want the peak of your cap behind, and your hair over your eyes, and a black patch on your nose, and a few other little things; but, on the whole, you're good.'

Cecil set to work at once to give these finishing touches to his appearance. Concluding with a roll on the hearthrug, for the purpose of gathering a little fluff, and taking off the edge

of his 'out-of-the-bandbox' aspect, he again appealed to Belle's judgment.

'Oh, yes,' she said, 'you'll do now. Anybody would take you for real. Yes, you're capital now.'

Hitherto the Pickles had had no other idea in this masquerade than that of amusing themselves for half-an-hour or so; but finding themselves got up with such elaborate completeness, it at length occurred to Belle that their brilliant efforts were worthy of much more general applause than their own.

'Cecil,' she said, 'wouldn't it be fun—oh, *wouldn't* it be fun?—to go out into the street as we are? Oh, I should like to! just to see if people would find me out or not. I don't believe they would, and I'm sure you look so delightfully vulgar that nobody would ever guess that you were not born a regular little gutter-boy. Oh, come on! We'll just have one turn, and then home again.'

'All right,' said Cecil; 'I'm ready.'

'Wait one moment. Let us put these things straight first. Here, Cecil, you carry our own

clothes into the closet in my room. Perhaps Mrs. Wolly mightn't like our going out dressed up—she *is* so queer. Now, if she were to come up before we got back, she wouldn't notice anything.'

Belle closed the closet-door upon the clothes, trimly folded and laid in orderly layers, and in another moment the Pickles had slipped, unobserved, through the entry, and gained the street.

CHAPTER X.

AN OLD BROOM, WHICH DOESN'T SWEEP CLEAN.

IT had been raining heavily all through the night, and at the present time, though there was hardly any visible fall, it became evident to every passenger that, by some means or other, he was getting wet. The day was dark and dismal, even for the dark and dismal fag-end of the year. The lamps, in anticipation of a very early nightfall, were, at the touch of the enchanter's wand, leaping into flame, though just then as unnecessary as that pale strip of moon that was peeping through the chimneys. A small army of scavengers was raking into heaps along the kerbstone, mud the consistency of batter-pudding that won't turn out. Woe to shortsighted old ladies who, in crossing the street, were thrown into sudden panic by a

passing vehicle! One leg at least was certain to get caught in that grim array of old-lady-traps. In spite of energetic scraping, the mud accumulated, and the wheels of every cab sprinkled a baleful spray upon the outside line of foot-passengers. Ugh! ugh! how cold it was! Well might the cabmen thump their chests; well might the policemen stamp their feet.

The Pickles—thinly clad as they were—hardly perceived that it was cold and damp, so entirely absorbed were they in the novelty of their situation. For the first hundred yards or so they fancied that every passer-by was staring at them with suspicious eyes. Meeting the first policeman was a terrible strain on their nerves. Whether hanging or only transportation would follow detection was a doubtful point. The matter, indeed, still remains undecided, for the policeman swung solemnly by without taking the slightest notice of the Pickles. After this they gained confidence, and began really to enjoy the delights of imposing on the public.

'It's grand!' said Belle, in a whisper; 'it's

the grandest fun in the world. I think I'll ask Mamma to sell me these things, so that I can have a turn in them whenever I like.'

'Lovely weather for the ducks,' people say, philosophically, when rain and mud hold sway over the face of the earth. They might give a human interest to the remark by adding, 'and crossing-sweepers.' Really it is a comfortable reflection, that the ghastly weather that inflicts such cruel penance on the great mass of society brings grist to the mill of one small section of it. Yes, the yellow mud is the crossing-sweeper's molten gold. It is the harvest which he reaps with his besom. Fine weather is his ruin. Mud is his making. No doubt (if the poor little chap knows how to pray at all) he prays for plenty of mud.

In country lanes and gardens the coy slug and the timid snail were coming out to enjoy the air and their simple vegetarian diet; and the punctual lily-white duck was there to meet them, and to enjoy *her* little occasional luxury, and all was going (from the duck's point of view) merry as a marriage-bell.

At every point of vantage in every crowded thoroughfare the crossing-sweeper was at work, red-nosed and purple-handed, but sweeping away for dear life. O kind folks, remember the crossing-sweeper! You can't drop a penny or a bit of silver into a better receptacle—even though it be the bag in church—than his greasy cap.

After crossing a 'sweeping' where two ragged boys were busily at work—they didn't even present their caps to such a meanly-clad couple as our Pickles—Belle suddenly stood still, and said to Cecil,—

'I've got an idea. *We'll* sweep a crossing.'

Cecil hailed this brilliant suggestion with the enthusiasm which it deserved. There was no time to be lost. It would be dark in less than an hour, and after dark it seemed that there would be little chance of pursuing their new calling successfully. It never occurred to the Pickles that besoms could be bought at shops, and hence their only plan was to make a bid for one that was actually in use.

'What will you take for your broom, little

boy?' Belle asked of one of the two young Arabs engaged upon the crossing hard by.

'See any green? *Get* out with yer!' replied the youngster, thinking he was being chaffed.

Belle explained that she was quite serious in her inquiry, and, as a tentative bid, offered him half-a-crown for his implement. The boy, much too wide-awake to let the forlorn old stump go for about three times its value, when there seemed a chance of his commanding almost his own terms, rejected this offer with great scorn.

''Arf-a-crown for this here broom, as I give seven bob for the day before yesterday? Not if I knows it. Get out with you! I ain't so young as I look.'

'Well, then, I'll give you seven shillings for it.'

'I never see nuffin like your meanness. D'ye 'ear that, William John? She wants me to let the besom go at cost price, with a lovely mud like this a-goin', and the crossin' worth a crown an hour! Make it 'arf-a-sov, and it's a bargain. Look sharp now, if you're a-goin' to trade. I

can't afford to lose no more time a-'agglin' with yer.'

Belle took out her purse, and dropped into the boy's hand her grandmamma's Christmas gift. He bit it as hard as he could, rang it on the pavement, held it up to the light, submitted it to his partner's judgment, and finally, satisfied of the genuineness of the coin, resigned his broom to Belle.

'It's dirt-cheap, bless me if it ain't,' he said. ''Pon my word, I almost wish I'd got it back again.' Then, to his partner, as the Pickles moved away with their acquisition, 'Oh, my eye, William John, ain't she a green 'un? She might have 'ad it for a tanner. The old thing's worn down to the jolly stump, and I'd have chucked it away to-morrer.'

The Pickles proceeded to an adjacent crossing, where a dirty-faced man was already at work. Belle forthwith began to sweep with great energy, if with little skill. She had no idea that there existed any property in crossings, and that her besom was interfering with vested interests. This great truth was, however,

there and then impressed upon her mind in an exceedingly effectual manner.

With quite, as it seemed to Belle, unnecessary warmth of language, not unaccompanied by brandishing of his besom, the dirty-faced man ordered the Pickles to 'hook it, and sharp too, off his lawful crossing.'

Apologising politely for the mistake. Belle withdrew, while, in silent astonishment at her 'himperance,' the man followed with his eyes her retreating figure for some twenty or thirty yards.

There were lots of likely crossings to be found, but each was already furnished with its presiding officer; and after the emphatic warning just received, our friends were not likely to invade the rights of property again in a hurry.

At last they came to a place called, from its being the junction of that number of streets, the Five Ways. Here, at last, they found the opening they desired. Four of the crossings were occupied, but one was at their service. They took possession at once, Belle sweeping, Cecil holding his hat.

Now I have no doubt that Belle's was the worst swept crossing of the five. I dare say you fancy, my friend that you could handle a broom as well as the housemaid. Just you try. You'll find out your mistake fast enough, I promise you. Excellence in sweeping, like excellence in everything else, requires practice.

However, indifferent as was the sweeper's skill, the Pickles' success beat, I engage to say, anything previously set down in the records of the crossing. The broom had hardly begun its work before an old gentleman dropped a sixpence into Cecil's cap, and directly after that a young lady walked out of her way—and got into a puddle—on purpose to contribute a threepenny bit. Every third or fourth passenger—and the thoroughfare was a busy one—gave something or other. Two or three times Cecil received, as well as money, a pat on the head or a slap on the shoulder. One lady took him into a confectioner's shop, and gave him a Bath bun.

No, there never was anything seen like their luck.

'I wonder everybody doesn't sweep a cross-

'The broom had hardly begun its work before an old gentleman dropped a sixpence into Cecil's cap.'—*P.* 124.

ing,' Cecil whispered to Belle. 'It's the best trade in the world. Just put your hand into my pocket. There must be pounds in it.'

As a matter of fact, when they had been at work about an hour, and the traffic had begun to decrease, counting their earnings under a lamp, they found that they had realised no less a sum than seven and fourpence.

'Yes,' said Belle, 'it certainly is a splendid trade. The only drawback is that brooms *are* so dear.'

Now what is the explanation of this wonderful good-fortune of our Pickles? Why, just this—their sweet faces and the extreme artfulness of their get-up. Never did the most experienced impostor gull the public more effectually than our youngsters in their first attempt. They looked so pretty, so poor, and so respectable, that harsh old curmudgeons who had not given away a penny for years unbuttoned their pockets like lambs, and dropped their money into Cecil's cap. Here, it seemed, was a really deserving case—poor young things who had evidently seen better days; the boy so

sweet and innocent, the girl so neat and modest; driven to earn their bread by sweeping a crossing. And the night so bitter cold too. Poor things! poor things! Chink, chink, the money dropped into the cap.

Just as they had finished counting their ill-gotten gains, the Pickles became aware of a pair of eyes fixed upon them in a steady gaze, half of envy, half of puzzled scrutiny.

The owner of the eyes was a little shabby boy, evidently a crossing-sweeper, since he rested his hands upon his besom while he stared.

The round red face seemed not altogether strange to Belle. She was about to ask Cecil if they had not seen it before somewhere, when, crying 'Halloa! it's Eddy Saker!' he ran forward, and saluted the youngster.

Yes, it was their guest of Boxing Day.

'Bless us, it *is* you, then!' said Eddy. 'I couldn't make it out—never was so bothered in my life. I thought I couldn't be mistaken in the faces, but then the rig floored me. Well, now, this is a rummy game as you're a-playin'. It beats all, it does; it beats everythink.'

'Isn't it fun?' said Belle. 'I like it better than the party ever so much, though that was charming. But how strange, Master Saker, that we and you should think of playing the very same trick, and on the same day too!'

'I ain't a-playin' no tricks,' said Eddy.

'No tricks! How do you mean? You don't mean to say that you're a real crossing-sweeper?'

'In course I am a real 'un. The Ann Street crossin' there belongs to me. You may see me there any day from eight o'clock in the mornin' till after dark.'

'Oh, how jolly!' said Cecil. 'You are a lucky fellow, Eddy. I'd give anything to be you.'

'Yes,' Belle put in; 'and how rich you must be! Why, you must make at least four pounds a-day! We've only been here about an hour, and we've got seven and fourpence.'

'Seven and fourpence! Oh, come! you're chaffin'.'

'No, indeed I'm not, Master Saker. Look; there it is. Show it him, Cecil.'

'Oh, my!' said Eddy, shaking his head,

very sorrowfully. 'They rains tanners and thrippennies on them as is playin' at sweepin', and they lets them starve as has to get their bread by it. I've got a hold granny and two little brothers dependin' on me, and I've only took fivepence all day.'

The poor boy turned his face away, and burst into tears.

'Oh! don't cry, Master Saker,' Belle said, laying her hand on his shoulder; 'please don't. It hurts me so to see anybody cry. You shall have all we've taken—every penny of it. And you'll give him your half-sovereign, too; won't you, Cecil?'

'Yes, that I will, and I'll ask papa to let me take my money out of the Bank as well. The Bank won't like it, I know, but that can't be helped. Come on, Eddy; hold your pocket open, and I'll shovel the money in. I wish I hadn't eaten that Bath bun; but it wasn't my fault, really. I never knew you had a grandmamma. Never mind though. We'll buy her tea-cakes instead. She likes tea-cakes; doesn't she, Eddy?'

The little crossing-sweeper, not much given to the melting mood, had dried his tears by this time. At first he wouldn't take the Pickles' money; but they implored him so earnestly to receive it, assured him that it would make them so happy to do something for his grandmother and his little brothers, that at last his resistance was overcome.

'God bless you for your kindness!' he said. 'You're two real good 'uns as ever was born. And poor old Granny does want the money, too. We've none of us had nuffin' to eat all day but a few dry crusses. I wouldn't have minded for myself; I can rough it well enough; but it was 'ard to see the poor old creatur' and the little 'uns 'unger.'

'Is she very old, Eddy? Poor thing! Oh, I am sorry for her!'

'She'll be eighty-one if she lives till next Lady Day. Her eyes is failin' her, too. She used to make a shillin' or two knittin' stockin's and such-like, but she's been able to do next to nuffin' lately. So there's been only me to keep the lot on 'em; and the landlord, he cut up rough

about the rent, and collared the blankets yesterday.'

This tale of distress—not, alas! a very uncommon one—was the first the Pickles had ever heard. Never in their lives before had they come into contact with the harsh realities of poverty, and Eddy's simple story touched their very souls. It was wonderful as well as sad. This mere child—hardly older than Cecil—who had a day or two ago been the associate of one of their idle freaks, stood revealed before them as the bread-winner of a whole family. A mere child, yet bowed with the burden of a man's sorrow; battling bravely to keep the wolf from the door with his poor little besom. Nobly unselfish, too, as well as brave—bidding hunger and cold wreak their worst upon himself, if only he might not see his loved ones suffer.

The world had always seemed to them so bright and happy—a world of toys and games, of warmth and plenty, of fond caresses and tender reproofs. And now they saw it a cruel, cold, hungry, struggling world—a world in which

'men must work and women must weep;' aye, in which children like themselves must play a part of stern and terrible earnest, and younger children still must suffer.

The revelation was too harsh and sudden. Belle's childhood seemed to have fallen from her in a moment. When she spoke her voice sounded strange to herself—strangely calm and solemn.

'Oh, Eddy!' she said, 'you must take us to see your grandmother. I don't like going to see her in this foolish dress, and I know we ought to have been home long ago. But I must see her, just to say something kind to her. Come, Cecil, we've got a little money left. We'll take the old woman a couple of loaves, and then we'll hurry home again.'

'All right,' said Cecil; 'but she must have tea-cakes, to make up for that Bath bun.'

CHAPTER XI.

MASTER SAKER AT HOME.

THE night was closing rapidly in, and the drizzle of an hour ago was changing into a sullen, persistent rain, as our little party made its way through the almost deserted streets towards Eddy Saker's home.

At the first baker's shop they came to they stopped, and the Pickles' few remaining pence went in the purchase of one large, handsome loaf, and one of less pretension, and a couple of tempting tea-cakes. Eddy also, out of his patrons' royal bounty, bought half-a-pound of salt butter, two ounces of tea, and a pound of coarse sugar.

It was a sight to do you good—it was a memory to rest greenly at the heart for years to come—the grin on Eddy's face as he stowed

away these luxuries in his jacket pocket. He said nothing. That seemed at the present moment the best, and, indeed, the only thing he *could* say. One does feel like that, you know, now and then.

Our friends—Eddy acting as guide—traversed a couple of broad, well-lighted streets; then a sharp turn led them almost immediately into a quarter of the town hitherto unexplored by the Pickles.

It was a region little known to the general well-to-do public, but familiar enough to policemen and Scripture-readers, and, by name at least, to students of criminal reports. Ill-lighted, ill-paved, ill-drained, its streets were shunned by all decent members of the working classes. Only the utterly broken-down in pocket or in reputation lived in its dismal slums. To move into Bagster's Green—so was the place ironically called—was pretty much to renounce your respectability, to give up the effort to keep your head above water, and to sink out of sight of decent folks. The one circumstance that threw a little salt of honesty and purity over its moral

putridity was the extreme lowness of its house-rent. Beggars can't be choosers, and hence occasionally a worthy family reduced to utter straits was glad to get, even in Bagster's Green, for a shilling a-week, a house that would have cost it thrice the money elsewhere.

Belle felt a little frightened at first, as she recognised the character of the quarter which they had entered. The eyes of the ill-favoured men who were loafing in entries or at the doors of the teeming public-houses seemed to follow her suspiciously. One drunken brute spoke to her; another reeled almost against her. Once or twice she heard language which, though happily she did not understand it, she felt to be horrible. She would have been glad to turn back had not the desire to see Eddy's grandmother, and to witness the old woman's pleasure in receiving Eddy's supplies, prevailed over her nervousness.

'Ere we are,' said Eddy, at last, leading the way up a narrow yard. 'This 'ere crib's called Paradise Row, and our 'ouse is number three.'

The room into which the Pickles followed

their guide was in almost complete darkness. No candle was burning, and the few sticks smouldering in the grate served rather to throw into relief than to mitigate the gloom.

Eddy groped his way into a little closet somewhere in the darkness.

'We'll 'ave a light in a twinkling,' he said.

'Not our last candle, my dear,' said a tremulous old voice. 'We can manage without well enough for one night.'

'Ah, Granny, you don't know who's come to see you, and what I've got in my pocket! We must 'ave a light, so as you can see your visitors.'

He lit a candle and placed it on a deal table, which, with a couple of broken-down chairs, seemed to be the sole furniture of the room.

The Pickles could now distinguish, sitting in front of the grate, a very old and feeble woman, and, huddling close up to her, two children—the elder perhaps six, the younger three or four. Worn and thin as it was, the old face was pleasant to look at. It was wonderfully tranquil.

The poor eyes, that had nearly lost their sight, had lost nothing of their kindly beauty. The white hair was smoothly braided. The threadbare old gown was neatly patched. Here, plain even to a child's eyes, was a nature which poverty and suffering had neither soured nor degraded. Lying upon the old woman's knees the children observed a Bible, and I think they understood in some dim way Whose peace it was that had settled on her face.

'Look 'ere, Granny—it's worth puttin' yer specs on for—look 'ere, Peter and Hada Hann. Open yer eyes wide, I tell yer; it's a jolly long time since yer see'd anything like this, I promise yer.'

Eddy drew from his pocket the sugar. There was a low murmur of admiration from the children. Forth came the tea. There was a prolonged 'Oh—h!' The butter was extracted, and laid on the table. Peter and Ada Ann broke into a shout of ecstasy. When to this goodly show the Pickles' loaves and tea-cakes were added, mere shouting was found inadequate to the full expression of the youngsters'

feelings. Ada Ann danced, and Peter rolled the whole length of the floor.

'Oh, my lad,' said the old woman, 'how did you come by all them good things? There's more money in them than you can have took this afternoon. But what am I saying? You're an honest boy, God be praised! and come by 'em in some honest way.'

Eddy pushed forward Belle and Cecil.

'Thank *them*, Granny, for the whole lot on 'em, and for this too.'

He dropped the half-sovereign into the old woman's lap.

'You can pay the rent now, Granny, and get the blankets back; and Hada Hann can get her boots mended, and Peter can get his jacket out of pop, and——'

'The Lord bless you and keep you, my dear!' said the grandmother, pressing Belle's hand. 'We were sore in need, sore in need—hungry, and you gave us meat; thirsty, and you gave us drink; naked, and you clothed us. It was to Him that you did it, my dear, and He won't forget you in *your* need.'

'Oh, please don't thank us!' said Belle. 'You don't know how happy it has made us. I never did any good in all my life before—never before; only think of that! and I might have done so much. But, indeed, it was not hardness of heart. I never thought about poor people wanting help.'

'Well, you've begun now; and, if I read your sweet face aright, you'll go on doing good. But, my dear, to judge from your dress, you haven't much to give away.'

'Oh! this dress is all a silly joke. Papa's ever so rich, and I've got a great deal of money in the Bank. I might have had I don't know how much more, only I spent so much in toys and things. I won't waste my money any more, though—indeed I won't.'

'Will you do one more thing, my dear, to make an old woman happy?'

'Oh, yes! Do tell me what it is! It makes *me* so happy to think I can help you.'

'Then read a bit to me out of this book. The print's too small for my old eyes, and Eddy, poor lad, is only a middling scholar.

'What shall I read?' asked Belle, opening the Bible.—*P.* 139.

'Not being able to read my Bible has made me miss my eyesight more than anything else.'

'What shall I read?' asked Belle, opening the Bible.

'You can hardly go wrong; it's all good in that blessed book. But I love the Psalms of David better than anything, I think. They says just what I feel, but could never put into words for myself. That book's the mouthpiece of all the poor, and old, and afflicted. Ah! it *was* good for David that he was troubled. His sorrows have made him the comforter of all the troubled ever since. He knows it up in heaven, and he blesses God for chastening him.'

Belle read several of the psalms dearest to the old woman, Eddy keeping the little ones quiet by the promise of a thick slice of bread-and-butter as soon as the reading was over. The grandmother closed her eyes in devout happiness, and often repeated with Belle from memory passages of considerable length.

As soon as the selections were concluded Granny made tea, and Eddy cut the bread-and-butter, the tea-cakes being reserved for

Sunday. A very hearty meal followed, in which the Pickles, at Eddy's earnest request, bore their part. Cecil thought, and said, that of all the bread-and-butter he had ever eaten, none was at all comparable to this.

After having dried their clothes at the fire, now liberally replenished, the Pickles rose to say good-bye, Eddy volunteering to escort them home.

'You shall soon have a Bible with print that you *can* read—great, big, big print—you see if you don't!' Those were Cecil's last words to the grandmother.

As they trudged through the sloppy streets the Pickles' pleasure in their recent charity was somewhat alloyed by the recollection that their reception on reaching home was hardly likely to be of a very gratifying kind. Two young truants, returning, after a mysterious absence of four hours, in a ridiculous masquerade, wet through, and splashed with mud from head to heel, must certainly expect a welcome more warm than flattering.

'I wish we hadn't done it,' said Cecil, glumly.

'Oh, no! don't say that!' Belle replied. 'We've been very naughty and silly, and, of course, we shall be punished. But, come what will, I wouldn't lose these two last hours for all the world.'

The words were hardly out of Belle's mouth when a dog-cart, turning sharply the corner in front, came dashing towards our little party. The pavement at this point was narrow, and the two boys were walking in the horse-road, Cecil outside. He was so engrossed in gloomy imaginings of the retribution awaiting him at home that the vehicle was almost upon him before he was aware of its approach. It was in vain that the driver shouted, and made a desperate effort to pull up. He only succeeded in checking for one instant his horse's speed. The boy was utterly unable to avail himself of the second offered him for escape. He stood paralysed. The next moment the dog-cart was pulled up twenty yards ahead, and a boy was lying senseless in the road. But it was not Cecil. He was sprawling on the pavement, frightened, but unhurt. It was Eddy Saker.

When he saw his friend's peril, and his powerlessness to help himself, the little crossing-sweeper came to the rescue with great courage and presence of mind. Throwing his left arm round Cecil, he swung him backwards upon the pavement. But the violent effort required for this feat threw forward Eddy's own right shoulder and side. Whether it was wheel or shaft that struck him, Belle—who alone witnessed the accident—could never tell. Something seemed only to touch him, and, without any cry, he fell forwards, the inner wheel passing over him.

Belle ran to him.

'Are you hurt, Eddy?' she cried, stooping over him; 'are you much hurt? Oh, speak to me! do speak to me, dear, dear Eddy!'

There was no reply. The boy was quite unconscious.

By this time a small crowd had gathered round the sufferer.

'He's dead!' 'He's only fainted!' 'His legs are broke!' 'He ain't hurt; he's only frightened!' Everybody was talking.

The driver of the dog-cart, having at length found some one to hold his horse, here thrust his way through the crowd, and knelt down by the side of Belle.

He made a hurried examination of the prostrate boy, whose head was now lying in Belle's lap.

'Ah, yes!' he said; 'his leg's broken below the knee here—a bad fracture, I'm afraid. He's a bit stunned too, but he'll soon come out of that. He must be taken to the hospital. Here, some of you, fetch a cab. Sharp's the word now. Off with you!'

In a couple of minutes' time a cab was on the spot.

Belle was quite calm now.

'Cecil, dear,' she said, 'I can't leave Eddy. His poor head's comfortable on my lap. I must go with him, and hear what the doctor says about him. You go home, dear, and tell them about the accident. Say that Eddy was hurt in saving you, and that I am gone with him to the hospital.'

Poor Cecil! It was no pleasant task that

Belle had imposed upon him—to return home, and bear the whole brunt of the parental wrath alone. He was a brave little fellow, however, and his sister's calmness and presence of mind had helped him to rise to the occasion too.

'All right,' he said; 'I'll go.'

Belle got into the cab. Then Eddy, showing as yet no sign of returning consciousness, was laid along the seat, his head resting against her shoulder.

'Drive off—slowly now,' said the owner of the vehicle that had done the mischief. 'I'll overtake you in my trap, and tell them at the hospital that you're coming.'

Cecil watched the cab move away, and then, with a heavy heart, proceeded homewards.

CHAPTER XII.

MYSTERIOUSLY MISSING.

WHEN, on entering the nursery half-an-hour after that important occasion on which she had deposited the charity-garments in the closet, Mrs. Wolly discovered that the Pickles were not to be found in any of their ordinary haunts, she was not gravely alarmed. It was clear that they had ventured out on some unauthorised expedition; but this, she conjectured, would not, at the very worst, extend beyond Gamble's. Accordingly she went, contentedly enough, about her various duties, only resolving that on their return the occasion should not be unimproved by a few appropriate remarks.

When, however, an hour had gone by without bringing sight or sound of the Pickles, she became a little uneasy, and thought it well to

inform Mrs. Parker that the youngsters were missing. That lady, never prone to fuss unnecessarily, and tolerably inured to eccentricities on the part of her progeny, assured Mrs. Wolly that there was no ground for alarm—though, of course, it was very naughty of the Pickles to disappear in that illicit way. The mother and the nurse waited for another hour, and then, neither the children nor any news of them coming to hand, both women became seriously alarmed, and judged it high time to take some steps for the runaways' recovery. First of all—it was getting dark now, and a heavy rain was falling—Augustus was despatched with an umbrella and wrappers, and orders to seek the truants at Gamble's, and, not finding them there, at Toppin's. In about half-an-hour the boot-boy returned, bringing, not the Pickles, but extraordinary tidings respecting them. Jones's Boy, cleaning the window early in the afternoon, had seen two young persons, answering to the Pickles in every respect save in the item of dress, slip out of the Doctor's house and glide up the street. He could have

spoken to them, but had not ventured to do so, because these young persons wore the costume of quite poor children, and before he could assure himself of their identity with the Pickles they had passed out of sight. However, he now felt certain that, in spite of their disguise, they were the 'real originals.'

Mrs. Wolly now bethought herself of the clothes in the closet, and, on examining the heap, found that two costumes were missing.

This discovery increased Mrs. Parker's anxiety, already serious enough. Mrs. Wolly and the housemaid were sent in different directions to prosecute inquiries. The Doctor, arriving a little later, went straight off to the police-station, to give information there.

When six o'clock came, and all efforts to trace the truants had proved ineffectual, Mrs. Parker, half beside herself with alarm, slipped on her bonnet and waterproof, and set the town-crier on the trail.

'O yes! O yes! O yes! Mysteriously missing from their home, No. 23 Nelson Street, a young

lady, aged eleven, and a young gentleman, aged nine. The young lady had on a lilac cotton dress and a tartan shawl; the young gentleman, a rough homespun jacket, a white comforter, and corduroy trowsers. Any person bringing them to their home, or giving information that will lead to their discovery, shall be handsomely rewarded.'

The crier, a few yards distant from Dr. Parker's house, was just intoning, in a voice worthy of the clerk of a country church, this thrilling announcement—already made in various parts of the town—when Cecil, wet to the skin, crept timorously up to his father's door, and, after a moment's hesitation, rang the bell.

At that instant a rough hand gripped him by the collar and another by the arm. Turning round, and struggling to free himself, he recognised in his captors Augustus and Jones's Boy.

'Let me go, can't you?' he was saying; 'do you want to——' when the door was thrown open and Mrs. Wolly appeared.

''Ere he is, mum,' the two young rascals shouted; 'we've brought him back.'

'Take him quick, mum,' added Jones's Boy, *solus*. 'Take him quick, I tell yer; I can't 'old him much longer. Oh my, what a struggle I've 'ad!'

'Where's Belle?' asked Mrs. Wolly.

'She's all right,' said Cecil: 'I'll tell you all about it in a minute.'

'Give us the reward, mum, if you please,' said Jones's Boy. '"Shall be 'andsomely rewarded," you know.'

Mrs. Wolly, I very much regret to say, in her delight at the recovery of one of her darlings, and the knowledge that the other was safe, put her hand into her pocket and gave the two young impostors half-a-sovereign between them.

'That ain't "'andsomely rewarded!"' said Jones's Boy. 'Never mind, though; virtue is its own reward. That's my consolation. Ain't it yourn, Augustus?'

Not one word of reproof, even from the

often-reproving Mrs. Wolly, did that lucky Cecil receive. Had he arrived two hours ago there is no reason to doubt that a scolding, severe and richly deserved, followed by bed without supper, would have been his mildest penalty. But now, all anger on the part of the authorities being merged in relief at the return of the wanderer, the boy not only got off scot-free from punishment of any kind, but came in for more hugs and kisses than he ordinarily received in the course of a full week. Indeed, Mrs. Parker locked up the coat and trowsers which he had worn among her most sacred treasures, and even the besom—Cecil brought that back with him—was kept as an interesting and touching memento. When Cecil told of his own narrow escape, and of Eddy's injury in saving him, kisses could no longer express the joy and gratitude of the fond mother and nurse, and tears were called into requisition.

It happened that Dr. Parker was one of the visiting-surgeons at the hospital to which poor Eddy had been carried. He resolved to hurry thither immediately, for the double purpose of

seeing that the little sweeper had everything that he wanted and of bringing Belle back with him.

The Doctor found the sufferer in bed, and Belle sitting beside him and holding his hand. The leg had been set, and the house-surgeon reported that the fracture was a simple one. A slight opiate had been administered, and the boy was now dozing, though from time to time he moaned in his slumber. His white cheeks and the great black rings round his eyes told a tale of terrible pain and exhaustion.

'Plucky little chap!' whispered the house-surgeon. 'He stood the setting like a man.'

'Dear, dear Eddy!' said Belle; and, bending forward, she kissed the unconscious cheek. 'Oh, Papa, it might have been Cecil lying there—it would have been, if Eddy hadn't risked his life to save him.'

'I know it, my dear,' said Dr. Parker; 'and whatever I can do to show my gratitude be sure I shall do. And now come home with me. Mr. Harkin will take care that the poor lad has everything he wants, and you shall come and see him again on Monday.'

After another kiss, and a lingering, pitying gaze upon the slumberer's pale face, Belle left the hospital. As soon as she was in the carriage with her father the thought of the distress that Eddy's non-appearance would cause his grandmother suddenly occurred to her mind. Dr. Parker willingly acceded to her earnest entreaty that he would go with her, and tell the old woman all that had happened.

CHAPTER XIII.

TWO MONTHS AFTER, WITH A FEW LAST WORDS.

ABOUT two months after the Pickles' crowning escapade and Eddy's sad accident, a little party of three was sitting on a bench in the garden of the Victoria Hospital.

It was an interesting scene, half melancholy, half cheerful, upon which the three friends looked. Little groups of invalids, in various stages of recovery, sat on benches like theirs, or paced slowly and haltingly about. Crutches played a prominent part in these processions. More than one sleeve, hanging loose, told a piteous tale of the means of winning bread lost for ever. They likewise told, however, one rejoiced to think, of disease arrested or accident mitigated, and very probably of life saved. The

poor pale faces, the stooping, shrunken frames, the labouring breath, the utter weakness, would also have been grievous indeed to contemplate, had one not remembered that in nearly every case it was convalescence, and not decline, that one witnessed.

The little party to which I called your attention was a most jovial little party. The mirth was not, indeed, noisy, but it was intensely genuine. The crutch leaning against the bench suggested that one of the three was a patient, though beyond that single circumstance there was nothing in the appearance of the pretty girl or of the two fine lads that looked at all like invalidism.

'Only think, Eddy!' said Belle (of course you know well enough of whom the party was composed), 'only think! you'll be home by this time to-morrow!'

'I can 'ardly believe it. Won't it be jolly? Oh, my! won't it just? Think of being with the dear hold Granny and the two youngsters again! and hall in the noo 'ouse, too! Oh, Miss Belle, it was good of yer father to put 'em

into that grand 'ouse, with four rooms in it, and furnished fit for the Lord Mayor! Granny says as there's six chairs, and a coal-cellar, and a warming-pan, and two bedsteads, and curtains to one on 'em! Bless us! we shall be startin' a pianner next!'

'Oh, yes, Eddy, you will like it. It really is so nice—so clean and pretty; and there's a little garden in front, too. I didn't see any flowers, but there's lots of oyster-shells.'

'And Granny *can* read her Bible,' Cecil put in. 'I took it to her yesterday. Oh, it is such a big one! My arm ached with carrying it. And she read me out a whole chapter, and said her eyes were none the worse for it. She made me write her name in it, and I only made one blot—besides the two little ones.'

'And you, Eddy,' Belle said, 'can read to her now.'

'Well, Miss Belle, I don't think I shall ever turn out a fust-rate scholard. Spellin's a lottery, and I ain't lucky. I can manage the little chaps well enough, but when them six-barrelled words is pointed at you, like so many revolvers,

I gets flabbergasted, and I says what comes fust in my mind.'

'But you have improved, Eddy; you're ever so much better than you were.'

'I'm glad to hear you say that, anyway. I shall have a fortnight, at all events, before I'm able to get to the crossin' again, and meanwhile I'll go at the readin' like a nigger.'

'I must tell you—I can't hold it in any longer—you're never going back to the crossing, Eddy; you're going to be our boy. Augustus has got a better place, and you're to come instead of him.' Cecil jumped off the bench, and performed his war-dance with great brilliancy.

'Oh, my!' said Eddy, grateful tears standing in his eyes; 'what a blessin' it is to get run over!'

The impression made upon the Pickles' minds by the story of the little crossing-sweeper's troubles and struggles, deepened as it was by his accident, did not pass away. Troublesome children they had been, but never

really naughty ones. Their queer freaks had been the result of thoughtlessness, and of spirits that must needs find an outlet somewhere for their overflowing vivacity. It is of children such as these—warm-hearted, tender-hearted, full of restless energy—that the best men and women are made. The namby-pamby children, that never give their mothers an hour's trouble, are seldom worth an hour's trouble. Parents should try, not to check the flow of their children's vivacity, but to direct it into a worthy channel. Find high-spirited boys and girls something good to do, and they will do it with their might; if not, they will find themselves something bad to do, and set about that in the same hearty way.

Our Pickles were happy in being led, while they were yet in the nursery, to a work in which their interest, gratitude, love, were warmly engaged. That work was in the first instance the promotion of the welfare of the Saker family. To solace Eddy, lonely and suffering, in the hospital; to carry to the household in Paradise Row, now deprived of its bread-

winner, little presents of food or money; to read to the grandmother; to amuse the little ones,—this became the great object of the Pickles' lives.

Don't suppose now, my dear readers, that these two troublesome children were transformed in an hour, or a day, into two little saints. No, no. Characters are not changed like that. The first impulse towards better things may be sudden, but the deepening of the impulse into principle is gradual. Any breath of God may blow the vital seed upon the heart; but the taking root downward, and the springing upward—the climbing into blade and ear, and after that to full corn in the ear—this is the work, not of a day, but of a life.

Our children were still often troublesome, often thoughtless, often naughty. Yet, at work and at play, there was in them a change for the better. Miss Baker's life was much more tolerable. Mrs. Wolly, though she grumbled and scolded as frequently as ever, did so with far less reason. Mrs. Parker admitted with joy that her Pickles had outgrown their title.

Those ministrations to the Saker family—not discontinued when Eddy was strong and well, but patiently persisted in when Peter was a strapping lad and Ada Ann old enough to take a 'place'—developed into more general ministrations. And, as years rolled on, the two young people, with their basket of good things and their Bible, became welcome visitors in many a black slum and feverous alley. In every difficulty the poor found in them wise counsellors and generous helpers. They let the Light that shineth in darkness into many a shadowed home. They smoothed the pillow for many a dying head, and laboured to make many a bereaved one feel that 'blessed are those that mourn.' They fought against drunkenness, and filth, and brutality, and ignorance, the mother of them all. Their heart and their prayers were in their work, and God blessed it and them.

THE END.

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